

Patrol of the Dead

THIS story—based on real experience of the Burma campaign—reads more like fact than fiction. This is because the author not only has a keen and observant eye but the artistic skill to make his characters stand out in relief.

A small party of British soldiers under an N.C.O. who have been dropped behind the Japanese lines get cut off from their main body. Their struggle to resume contact is a little epic. Faced with the inevitable answer to the problem, we see not only the British soldier as a type but the types that go to make the British soldier reacting in a way so familiar to, and so well loved by, so many who have known them. There may be better war novels. We have not read them.

The author took part in the late Major-General Wingate's air invasion of North Burma in 1944, and spent five and a half months behind the Japanese lines.

Patrol of the Dead

by

J. JOHNSTON



London

ARTHUR BARKER LTD.

First published in Great Britain

This book is dedicated to my wife,
Muriel, with my grateful thanks for
her constant faith, criticism and help
in preparing this manuscript.

J. J.

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
MORRISON AND GIBB LIMITED, LONDON AND EDINBURGH

Chapter 1

"Brr of orl right, ain't it?" said Jack Roberts to the section in general. "Cool the ole dawgs orf a bit. When I get back to Civvy Street I'm goin' ter get a car. I've 'ad enough bleedin' walkin'. Wot d'you say, Chalky?"

"That's enough talking, Roberts. You know the major's red hot if he catches you. Anyway, it's time you relieved Evans with the Bren," Corporal Donovan interrupted.

"Carn' see the point abaht this talkin' business when they can see us from the opposite bank if they're around," Roberts mumbled. "'Ere y'are, Wack," handing his rifle over and shuffling the Bren gun into a more or less comfortable position on his shoulder.

Waist deep they lunged forward against the current, and occasionally there was a muffled curse as someone slipped on the odd stones which marred the sandy bottom. The swirling waters tugged their battle-green slacks from under their puttees and the disturbed sand settled itself between their toes, and they wished the river far enough away in spite of the coolness. After about two miles there was a break in the high banking on the far side, and a platoon was sent to take up bridgehead positions while the remainder of the column, now strung out a little, formed up behind them before moving into bivouac for the night.

It was early June 1914, and almost three months previously the Chindit Brigades had landed on hastily constructed airfields in the jungle in Burma, almost two hundred miles behind the Japanese front. At the same time, the Japanese launched their vaunted "March on Delhi" by cutting off the British and Indian forces at Imphal and Kohima.

While the bitter struggle which was to prove the turning point of the Burma war was taking place, the Chindit columns, having achieved complete surprise with their bold landings, struck at the enemy supply lines, blowing up trains and tearing up miles of track, playing havoc with his road transport by mining the roads and setting up ambushes, and generally making a nuisance of themselves.

When the Japs realised that the airborne landings were no minor probe but a major assault, they diverted troops from the main fronts and rushed up all the reserves they could muster in an effort to contain this ferocious dragon in their innards. But the Chindits were not very easy to get to grips with. Out of the blue they would strike hard at some vital spot, and by the time the Japs had moved troops there they were gone, only to re-appear elsewhere and repeat the process. They had no lines of communication and supply for the Japs to cut, for they relied on air-supply and what little food they could buy from the friendly Kachin villagers, and they roamed where they would. The Japs were like someone who has disturbed a hornet's nest and is being stung in so many places at once that he doesn't know what to do, and in the end waves his hands wildly at the air and runs.

By throwing so many troops into the area the Japs did, however, succeed in making things more difficult for the British, who had to be constantly on the alert for snipers and ambushes. That was why this particular column was marching up the river in an effort to throw the enemy off their trail for a while to allow them to arrange a supply drop and take a much-needed rest.

After a night free from enemy interference, parties accompanied by mules went out to take the supply drop which had been arranged for noon. The remainder of the column spent the morning cleaning weapons and relaxing a little. Those in the bivouac heard the Dakotas roaring

over dead on time, and while the Quartermaster and his staff prepared to receive and check the ammunition, clothing, animal fodder and the "K" ration food supplies, the others took up alert positions in case the Japs decided to look in on the proceedings. Everything went off peacefully enough though, and the loaded mules soon began to trickle in with the supplies which were quickly ticked off and distributed to the various sections. The drop had been taken in a large clearing, and all the containers were recovered, enabling everyone to be issued with six days' rations, a heavy but necessary load. Corporal Donovan's section were well pleased with the drop, as Chalky White had received two hundred "Blighty" cigarettes with his mail. After dividing one tin of fifty between the smokers in the section, he gave a tin each to Don Evans and Dave Rawnley to carry for him, and retained one tin himself. Everyone was in good spirits that night, and after supper those not on guard spent some time yarning about home before rolling into their blankets.

Early the following morning an officers' conference was called, followed by "Orders" for section leaders.

Gathering his section round him, on returning from "Orders," Bob Donovan said: "Well lads, there's a job coming off."

"Cor blimey," said Jack Roberts disgustedly, "I fought we was supposed to be restin'."

"Shut up until you've heard everything, Robbo. Now, as I was saying, there's a job coming off against the railway, and about half the column is taking part. For once our platoon has got the cushy job of guarding the soft elements which are remaining here. Our section is to move about four miles away to keep a look-out on a village where some Japs have been reported. We are only there to report back to Column H.Q. if any Japs start moving down the track toward our bivvy area, and if nothing happens we

rejoin the column in two days' time ready to move off again. Incidentally, one of the Burma Rifle chaps will be coming along to try to obtain definite information about the Japs from the villagers. Now get your kit packed; we move off as soon as we've had a bite to eat."

Chapter 2

As they marched along a well-used track through fairly thick jungle, Bob Donovan felt well pleased with life. For two days he would be more or less his own boss again, and he liked the feeling. True, he had to work to orders, but they were very flexible. It wasn't often that such chances came his way, and he was going to make the best of this one.

There was, of course, an element of danger, but all war was dangerous and it only added spice to the job. So far the section had been lucky and he saw no reason why their luck should change. After all, this was only a routine patrol and he had some good men with him.

He laughed to himself as he thought of the transformation that had taken place. A few months previously, when they had first been banded together as a section, most of them had been very awkward jungle men. He remembered how on one of their first training schemes together they had been so intent on keeping an eye open for snakes that they had sprung all the booby traps and been written off as dead by the umpire. Now they had come almost to accept the jungle as their natural habitat.

Almost, for one or two of them would not allow themselves to get used to it. Hoppy Hopkinson was one. He was a misfit all right; should never have come in. Not that he was really too old for this sort of thing at thirty-

five, but he was forever trying to convince himself and anyone else who would listen that he was. He was a born grumbler, but they had grown so used to it that something would have been missing from life had he not done so—but then he always did.

Jock Finlayson was another who didn't take to this life. It wasn't just the jungle, it was war which Jock hated. War which had forced his life out of its rut and cast him amongst a lot of unsympathetic strangers. The fact that they, too, were in a similar position did not interest Jock in the slightest degree. All he was interested in was getting home to Glasgow to his wife and two children and his old leather-seated chair in a shipping office. To make matters worse, he hadn't a spark of humour in him—and was, therefore, the butt of most of the jokes and practical tricks which the others thought up. The queer thing was the way he and Jimmy Derris were such great pals, for Jimmy was just as cheerful as Jock was glum, and he enjoyed teasing him as much as anyone. Maybe it was because they had joined up together.

But at least one could understand Hoppy and Jock, which was more than could be said for Lance-Corporal Stormy Gale, his second-in-command. He was a nice enough chap and easy to get on with, but seemed to weave some invisible barrier around himself to prevent anyone becoming too friendly. He would converse freely and knowledgeably on almost any subject until the conversation turned to home life and the past, when he shut up like a clam.

The others were a really good crowd, youngsters who hadn't enough past behind them to regret the change, and with enough adventure in their souls to make the best of what life offered. Don Evans who had joined the army as a boy and although only twenty-one, already an old soldier; his pal, Chalky White, ex-office boy who had volunteered for the glamour of being a soldier, and who

was still looking for it ; Dave Rawnley, born in India of British parents, a seeker after knowledge of the homeland he had never seen ; Jack Roberts, an effervescent little Cockney with a perpetual grin on his face, whose acid tongue got him into no end of trouble, and nearly always talked him out of it ; Harry Colgrave, a country lad who never said a great deal but was always on hand when required.

There was a tugging at his sleeve and a voice, Dave Rawnley's, shattered his thoughts. "Hey, Corp ! Isn't it time to change the Bren yet ? That's twice I've asked you and got no reply. Thought you must be asleep."

"Eh ? Oh, I was just thinking, 'I guess.'" He looked at his watch. "Yes, it's time. Change the Bren."

A short time later Chalky came back from his position, as forward scout and waved to them to get into the bushes off the track. "Villager," he announced briefly, "heading this way with a load of bananas."

"O.K., better get off the track until he's passed by. Where's Evans ?"

"Lying hidden."

They made their way into the trees for a short distance and waited for the native to pass. Unfortunately he didn't. Observing the signs of shod feet turning off the track, and recognising them as not belonging to the hated Japanese, his curiosity got the better of him and he followed the footprints until he found himself looking into the wrong end of a rifle barrel.

"Lookin' fer somefink, cock ?" grinned Roberts.

The startled expression on the native's face changed to a broad grin when he saw the Englishman and he burst into a flood of words.

"'Ang on, yer 'eathen. I carn unnerstand that perishin' lingo. 'Ere, Johnny," he called to the Burma rifleman, "see if you can make out wot 'e sez."

While the Burrif was interrogating their visitor, Donovan took Stormy on one side. "We can't be very far from the village now, Stormy, so while we find out what this Johnnie knows, take a couple of lads with you and see if you can pick out a suitable bivvy area for the night. We'll have to keep the villager with us for a while. We can't afford to let him go back in case he gives the show away."

"We're about a mile from the village," Stormy reported on his return, "and there's a good stretch of open paddy fields between us. This seems to be the main track, but there are two or three smaller ones leading toward the river which don't appear to be used much. I've found a good bivvy about half a mile farther on which should do."

"Good. We'll have to go careful, though, because this chap from the village says there are a good number of Japs in the place. Here, Jock, and you, Robbo," Donovan called, "you two take over as point scouts at one hundred yards interval. You, Stormy, go with Jock and show him the way. Chalky, go and cut yourself a decent-sized branch and sweep the track after the rest of us, while the Burrif and the village Johnnie follow barefooted. O.K. ? Right, get going, you scouts."

Having settled down in their new position, and with two men on duty as listening posts, the corporal told the Burma rifleman to get changed into his longyi and make a reconnaissance of the village. Before he went, most of the section gave him money to buy food, and Hoppy particularly asked for a chicken in spite of Robbo's crack that he couldn't even brew tea let alone cook a chicken.

Just after dark the Burrif returned with a basket containing some sweet potatoes, tomatoes, coconuts and a live chicken. Dumping the food, he went straight over to the corporal and held a hurried, whispered conversation with him.

Calling the lads over, Donovan explained that there were

four or five hundred Japs in and around the village and they were well armed with machine-guns and mortars. "I'm sure the major didn't expect that lot, so I'm sending the Burrif and Colgrave back to pass the information on. We'll carry on here, and make sure you keep a good lookout because it's not a healthy spot. And Hoppy, kill that damned chicken or they'll hear it in the village."

After the two men had left to report to the column the others set to preparing a cold supper as the corporal would not allow fires.

The bananas were bought from the Kachin and Jack Roberts and Dave Rawnley were told to sleep on either side of him to make sure he didn't slip off to the village.

About 4 a.m. Chalky and Evans, who were on guard, heard dogs barking from the direction of the track and immediately awoke the corporal. The sound grew louder, and voices could be heard shouting to the dogs, so Donovan ordered the whole section to stand by ready to move.

Kneeling behind a big tree, Chalky quietly slipped a round up the spout. "My heart's beating like a big drum," he thought, "they're bound to hear it. Anyway, they seem to be passing, thank goodness. Hell's bells, one of the blasted dogs has scented us. Now we're for it."

"Time for us to move. It may only be villagers, but we can't wait to see. You bring up the rear, Stormy, and everybody keep close to me," came Donovan's whispered instructions.

Moving slowly in the thick blackness, they stumbled over the roots of trees and crashed into thorny thickets, tearing their clothes and scratching their flesh. Although they tried to move quietly, the sound of their passing seemed excessively loud. Faintly they heard a high-pitched voice calling and the dog which had scented them, the hunter losing its prey, gave a few excited barks and bounded back to its master. Presently the corporal came

across a faintly discernible track and halted the section whilst he and Stormy held a short discussion. Putting out a forward scout they then moved off along the track.

Jock Finlayson was one of those unfortunate people who cannot see very well in the dark, and although most of the others had become accustomed to the blackness by this time, he still felt as though he was walking into a blanket, and as he ducked to avoid a low branch he missed his footing and fell headlong into a ditch at the side of the trail.

His pal Jimmy Derris started to laugh and made some sarcastic remark which Jock bitterly resented. They were almost at blows with one another when Bob Donovan intervened, which made matters considerably worse, as Jock considered him an idiot on account of his liking for practical jokes. Pushing the two friends apart, Donovan, in a voice so serious in an effort to hold back the laughter, said, "Look here, Jock, don't be so childish, and stop crawling all over the place playing hide and seek. You're a big boy now." Jock almost exploded, and became angrier every second whilst the corporal shook with mirth at his own joke.

If it did nothing else, the incident relieved the tension, and it was decided that they had done enough for that night and would move off the track and get some sleep.

At first light a patrol was sent out to establish their position while the others moved deeper into the trees.

When the patrol returned Donovan decided that they were safe enough to light fires, and they all set to preparing biscuit burgu, a concoction of crumbled "K" ration biscuits boiled with powdered milk and sugar to taste, and followed by a tin of chopped pork and egg yolk and the inevitable mug of smoky "char."

While the others sat back enjoying a smoke the corporal spread out his map, and after a while he called Stormy over

and told him that they would have to find a fresh hide-out near the main track and the village, and that he was to take two men with him to see how things lay. While Stormy was on the patrol he and the others would search for water, which by this time was getting low, and when the patrol returned the whole section would move to the new position and continue their watch.

Water was found by Evans shortly after Stormy left, and all the chaguls—a canvas water bag,—and water bottles were filled. Evans could be relied upon to provide most of life's needs, for he was the best jungle man in the party, having quickly adapted himself to the conditions.

Stormy and his party had been gone almost an hour and a half and Donovan was beginning to get worried, for he had expected them back long before this. They were taking things easy, reading some magazines which Roberts had received on the supply drop, and Roberts, an ex-garage mechanic, was explaining some of the finer points of an illustration in a motor magazine to Dave Rawley, when rifle and automatic fire broke out no great distance away. The corporal jumped to his feet and stood listening for further sounds.

"S'orlright, Corp," Roberts assured him. "The yellow-bellies is 'avin' some targit practice," and he returned to his book.

There was another short exchange of shots, and Donovan ordered them to get dressed and stand-to.

Rawnley and Evans were the first to get their equipment on, and while the former clipped a magazine on to the Bren gun Evans fixed the grenade-throwing cup to his rifle and had a grenade ready to drop in when they heard someone running toward them.

Donovan had just time to tell them to hang on and to hurry the others up, when Stormy Gale, hatless and

dishevelled, came running along the track glancing over his shoulder every few yards. He would have passed their position had not Donovan rushed out to meet him.

Stormy was extremely exhausted, and the corporal almost carried him to the hide-out and sat him down against a tree. "Japs caught . . . us . . . ambush . . . got Derris and . . . Jock," he panted breathlessly.

"Take it easy, Stormy boy," said Donovan, patting him on the shoulder. "You others keep a good dekkko in case they're following, and keep quiet and still."

Taking a few deep draughts of air into his lungs, Stormy continued. "When we got to . . . the main track we . . . noticed lots of Jap footprints. . . . Their cloven jungle boot, you . . . know. . . . All moving away from the village. We were examining the tracks . . . when one of their patrols . . . came in sight. Ran like hell round a bend in the track and started making . . . back here when some more of the devils caught us." He shuddered and lay silent for a while. "Didn't see 'em until Jimmy Derris caught a full burst from . . . an automatic. Never knew what hit him, poor devil." He gabbled on faster, as if trying to force the terrible details from his mind. "Jock tried to run to him but I forced him round and we doubled back again. Didn't know where we were running, but suddenly we came to a track, this one, and they were waiting for us. Saw them just before they opened fire and we let fly at them, but Jock had been hit in the guts and as he doubled up screaming he rolled into the damned ditch again."

Stormy started to laugh hysterically, and when Donovan clapped his hand over his mouth to stop him he clung to him sobbing. "You're O.K. now, pal," muttered the corporal. "Anyway, they don't seem to have followed you so far, so I guess we'll be making tracks to the column some way or other."

"How is another question," he thought. "The main track is obviously impossible if the Japs are using it, and as there are only seven of us left now we wouldn't stand any chance against the large parties the Japs must be moving up. We've got to get back to warn the column somehow, though, and it's no use staying here any longer." His eyes fell on Stormy who lay quietly back against the tree now. "Poor devil, he's all in. Jimmy and Jock have gone too. Open your gates, Valhalla, a couple of warrior pals are on their way. Two more forgotten mounds of earth that Britain will never know about. If they get even that, for these yellow heathens don't bother much about their own dead, never mind ours."

Aloud he said, "Well lads let's get out of . . ." He broke off as heavy mortar and small arms fire broke out from the direction of the column area. "Listen, all of you," he continued, "Our best bet is to make contact with the column again quickly, but if we try to push through from this side it's ten to one the Japs'll get us, and if they don't then our own blokes are quite likely to take a pot at us with this lot going on, so I propose to make down this track at full speed until we hit the river and to approach the column area from that side. That way we're less likely to run into the Japs and our own lads can see that we're friends."

"Before we go, Bob, what about this chap?" asked Evans, pointing to the Kachin.

"Oh! he can go back home now," replied Donovan. "They know we're somewhere in the vicinity anyway."

Evans, who had become quite attached to the villager, took off his bush-hat, bowed as well as his pack would allow him, shook hands and finally waved good-bye. The Kachin stood there, a huge grin spreading over his young face. Evans tried again and turning him round he pointed to the village then to the Kachin and ran a few

paces forward. The grin spread even further over the native's features but he made no attempt to leave.

"C'mon, Don," said the corporal, "we can't waste any more time. Leave him to go home in his own time." And off they set.

The villager followed closely behind Evans for some way, so they stopped again.

"Here, Robbo," said Evans, "you're good at this sign language, you have a go."

Pointing to the village, Roberts said, "Wife, bibby," making appropriate curving motions through the air with both hands. "Kip, bed, charpoy," and he placed his head upon his hands and closed his eyes. "Chicos," he said, going through the nursing motions and then making steps in the air to show how many children he thought the Kachin should have. The native and the rest of the section were vastly amused at his mimicry, but the villager still made no attempt to go.

They looked to the corporal for a decision. "O.K., let him come, and for crying out loud, let's get moving."

Evans was leading scout and the Kachin moved silently behind him. They had covered about two miles and the firing sounded much louder, when suddenly the Kachin pulled Evans to a halt and, speaking frantically by sign language, made him understand that Japs were approaching. Patting him on the shoulder Evans ran back to the others and gave them the news.

Donovan hastily got the section off the track and hidden in the forest as a Jap patrol passed by, and thankful blessings were breathed for the Kachin's timely warning.

Something was wrong, though, for just out of sight the Japs stopped and could be heard jabbering excitedly. They then reappeared, examining the track closely.

"Of all the blasted luck," whispered Chalky. "They've spotted our footprints."

"Easy now, lads. We've got 'em just where we want them. Stormy, take your Bren section round to the right a little way, and don't open fire until I do."

As Stormy, Dave Rawnley and Chalky crept silently away, the Japs halted again and pointed in their direction.

"Probably think they're old tracks and not worth bothering about," said Donovan as the Japs stood on the track arguing. "Uh—uh. Here they come."

The Japs evidently did not expect them to be so close to the track, for the N.C.O. drew his two-handed sword and kept up a steady chattering to the others who stayed close by him, not too spread out.

"Grenades first when I give the word and then everything you've got," whispered Donovan.

The Japs were about thirty feet away and beginning to fan out when Donovan yelled, "Give it to 'em, lads," and flung his Mills bomb.

The explosion was quickly followed by another, and then another, but the third had hit a tree and landed short, and a shower of leaves, twigs and dirt made them duck down.

Of the Japs there was now no sign, but someone had been hit and was screaming in agony. A second or two later they came on again led by the sergeant, his face and body running with blood, but still grasping his sword in one hand. Robbo's carbine fired from the corporal's left and the Jap stumbled and fell. Evans, Hoppy and Donovan were also firing rapidly now and each downed a man before the others faded away.

One of the fallen Japs struggled to his knees, but Evans killed him before he could get his grenade free. His comrades, emitting ear-splitting shrieks, charged into the affray again, whilst from the right came a welcome burst of the Bren, mingled with the rifle-fire of Stormy's section. More of the Japs fell as the bullets thudded into them,

and two of the remaining three turned and fled but the third continued to rush forward. Evans leapt to his feet in the face of his charge, and their bodies crashed and rolled over with the impact. The Jap twisted round and was on him like a mongoose after a snake, his hands tearing at his throat when a skilfully wielded dah almost severed his head from his body, and a grinning Kachin pulled the messy corpse off his new friend.

Wiping away the blood with his sweat-rag, Evans clasped the villager to him for a moment and said, "Mucker, you won't understand this, but I'm certainly glad you were around just now. You're a real Kachindit, and we're going to get on very well together." They grinned at each other and both knew a great feeling of affection.

While the others gathered round the corporal, Stormy made his way carefully over toward the wounded Jap who was still moaning loudly, and startled the section into silence as the report of his rifle echoed through the trees.

"Too far gone for anyone to help him," he explained as he rejoined them.

"Should've let the swine rot like me bfuuvver's doin in one of their prison camps," Robbo said, very belligerently, and Donovan hastily broke in to prevent any further outburst.

"We've come out of that little lot very well," he said, "but they'll be after our blood any minute, so we've got to move fast. I'm keeping to the trees for a while to try to throw them off the scent. Stormy, you make sure no one lags behind." They headed deeper into the forest, but the undergrowth was very thick and they were making little progress until the Kachin went forward and took the lead. His eyes picked out the easiest path, and only occasionally did he bring his dah into use to lop away some forbidding barrier of the jungle. After a while he brought them to a narrow pathway, which they followed for some

distance before it came to an abrupt finish, and the Kachin again forced his way into the bushes and the overbearing heat closed in upon them. For some hours they continued to pit their strength against the forest, but the trees seemed only to mock at their puny efforts at escape. Branches were thrust aside only to spring back again like a series of locked doors in some interminable corridor of a madman's nightmare. Whichever way they turned, the trees were waiting in cumbrous array, beckoning them on as the softly rustling leaves seemed to say, "This way; this way to freedom," until they fancied they heard the laughter of the devil abroad in the forest.

The Kachin was lost. He was also badly frightened, for did not the forest spirits inhabit these forbidden places which only the wild pig dare penetrate?

Blindly the soldiers had put their faith in the native, their sweat-smarting eyes failing to take note of their passage as they struggled wearily on following the moving boots in front, eager only to get deeper into the jungle and away from the Japs who were waiting to kill them.

As the Kachin stopped at last they lifted their eyes from the ground, and the look on his face told them that he admitted defeat. For a moment or so they stared at him unbelievably, for in their eyes the villager must know his way through the forest. Hoppy flopped to the ground, the weight of his pack pulling him on to his back so that he looked like some fat beetle in distress. "I've 'ad it," he muttered. "Fagged out." He puffed his cheeks and blew heavily, "Blasted jungle. Should never 'ave sent me in, I'm too old for this game."

"What do we do now?" Dave Rawnley asked, parking his body next to Hoppy.

"Frankly, I haven't the foggiest idea," replied the corporal. "It seems as though we're in a bit of a pickle."

"Aye it does that," agreed Chalky, taking a cigarette

from a tin. He wiped the sweat from his face and neck before lighting it.

Evans walked over to him, a cigarette in his hand. "Give us a light, buddy." He opened his lips slightly, blew a cloud of smoke in the air and watched it disperse before remarking, "Don't seem to be no Japs around here, that's one thing."

"Yes, it's nice and peaceful here now that we've stopped," said Stormy indicating their surroundings with a wave of his hand. "I could sleep here for a while in blissful ignorance of the war."

"Could you, now. You could sleep anywhere, any time, given the excuse. Come on, take your packs off, I'll give you fifteen minutes."

"I wonder 'ow the column went on," Roberts asked them in general, pulling his bush-hat over his face and settling himself more comfortably.

Donovan lay aside the chagul and wiped the water from his lips with the back of his hand. "They're still at it, anyway. I can hear the mortars occasionally, although they seem to be some distance away now."

"It's the trees," ventured Stormy, "they soon deaden the sound of gunfire. I shouldn't think we're more than a couple of miles away at the most. As the crow flies, that is."

"Yus, mite, but we ain't blinkin' crows," said Roberts, the bush-hat bobbing up and down as he spoke.

"I wonder what will happen to his wife and kids?" asked Chalky out of the blue.

"Whose wife and kids?"

"Jock's. From the photographs he showed us she didn't seem to me to be the type to take it very well."

"There is no type which takes a thing like that very well," Stormy told him. "Some go to pieces visibly, others keep it inside, hidden behind a cold mask for the

benefit of outsiders, but it eats away their life secretly. It leaves a great void of loneliness waiting to be filled by a cherished love and companionship which will never return. I know, I've had some. No, Chalky, when one's loved one goes life has no meaning, it is worse than death itself, and no one who has truly loved can take it very well."

Stormy's eloquence rather surprised them, and for a few moments they dwelt silently upon his words.

"Yes, it's a great pity," remarked the corporal at last. "They always say that time is a great eraser of sorrow, but I see what you mean about the loneliness business, Stormy. Maybe it's as well that Jimmy Derris had no one to mourn for him. I feel different about the war now, it's become a personal thing. Previously we heard of men getting killed, even saw some of our own column go, but it was just bad luck, there was no personal loss. It was the kind of thing which happened in war but could never happen to us. Now it has happened to us, because Jock and Jimmy were part of us. When a section of men live together as closely as we have done they are bound by unbreakable ties and become almost a family. Only two months ago we numbered eleven, and now only seven of us remain together. Colgrave may have got back to the column last night with the Burma rifleman, and Spud Taylor went out sick, but Jock and Jimmy have gone for good. The war has reached this section—us!"

"Yes, and by the time it passes us by maybe a few more of us will be with Jock," said Chalky sombrely.

"Can you sing, Don?" Roberts called over to Evans. "We've got a lot of comics, so between us we should be able to get up a concert party."

"They're certainly a cheerful lot, aren't they?"

"Yes, come on, lads," said Donovan rising to his feet, "We're getting morbid sitting here."

The bush country gradually began to thin out and give

way to larger trees whose mass of foliage forbade the life-giving sunlight to the smaller bushes and the parasite growth nearer the ground, and toward late afternoon, utterly exhausted, they came suddenly upon the river.

Donovan made toward some good cover and finally called a short halt. As they had very little water left, he sent the Kachin to fill some chaguls at the river and decided to allow a fire to be lit and some tea brewed before moving on.

They were waiting for the water to boil when Hoppy, who was on guard, came running over. "Listen, Kid," he blurted out, "it's stopped." It was a second or two before it dawned on them that the noise of the battle could no longer be heard.

"Any of you notice how long ago it stopped?" queried Donovan, but they all shook their heads.

"Right, then, quick with your char and we'll soon be back with the column."

"If they 'aven't already moved," muttered Hoppy mournfully, voicing all their secret fears.

Finishing their hot tea in quick time, they made their way into the water and, keeping close to the bank, waded up-river.

After travelling about half a mile, Dave Rawnley, who was leading scout, signalled them to a halt and came back to tell Donovan that they had reached the column area.

Taking Rawnley, Chalky and the Kachin with him, Donovan left the others hidden near the river and crept cautiously toward the bivouac.

Apart from Evans, who slept, those left behind spent a nervous half-hour fingering their triggers and waiting. They jumped hastily to their feet as the corporal and the others returned.

"Bad news, lads," said Donovan, flopping down. "The column's gone."

For a moment they looked at each other unbelievably and then, all speaking at once, plied Donovan with questions, not giving him time to answer, until he snapped at them to be quiet.

They were further dismayed when he told them that the column had been badly mauled and had left behind at least four men and two or three mules dead and some of the heavy equipment, including a smashed wireless set. Their only chance, he said, would be to make for the rendezvous area the following day and hope that the column would still be there waiting for the railway party to join them.

"We've 'ad it, Kid," Hoppy said when Donovan had finished. "They've left us to the Japs. If I could only get me 'ands on that rat of a major I'd choke the rotten life out of 'im."

"Don't talk such ruddy tripe, Hoppy, you never were strong in grey matter. And grab your kit, all of you, we're moving to a better spot for the night."

Coming off guard in the early hours, Chalky and Evans noticed that Donovan was still awake. Going over to him, Chalky asked, "Everything all right, Bob?"

"Hello, you two. Come here and talk for a little while. I know you won't flap like the others. No, Chalky, everything isn't all right. We're in a damn bad spot and you know it. Somehow I've a feeling that we won't find the column at the rendezvous, and that leaves seven of us about a hundred and fifty miles or more behind Jap lines with about six days' rations apiece and not a great deal of ammunition."

"But there are plenty of columns operating in this area," said Evans. "Surely we can contact one of them."

"I'm all for making back to India or heading for China," broke in Chalky. "Look at the slap-up feeds those chaps

from the first expedition got when they went there. Birds' nest soup, shark's fins. . . ."

"And how the hell do we get there?" interrupted Donovan. "All I've got is a large-scale map of this area and the escape map, which I think we can forget about because it doesn't show enough detail, and anyway I've lost the compass. Must have dropped it during that 'do' with the Japs yesterday. No, I guess we've had that. Our best chance, as Don says, is to hope to contact one of the columns, but this area's teeming with Japs after all the trouble our chaps have stirred up just lately, and we're more likely to run into them than some of our chaps."

"I don't fancy just wandering around looking for one of the columns though, Bob. I'd sooner have a bash at the yellow devils and finish a few of 'em off before they get me if we can't get out to India."

"Well, you may like this idea then, Chalky. Stilwell's nearer to us than anyone else, pushing his Ledo Road forward, and my idea is to make our way north and on the way have a go at any small parties of Japs we meet. I'll put it to the others if we don't hit the column at the R.V., but whatever any of them say, I'm making the final decision, and if I have to bust a few of them on the nose I'm keeping the usual discipline. If we get out at all it will be as a fighting section not a lot of rabble."

As he finished speaking the Kachin came over to Evans: "Hello, Kachindit, what do you want at . . ." he began when the native stopped him and adopted a listening attitude.

For a second or two they could hear nothing, then faintly they heard someone crashing through the trees and making toward them. "Grab your guns and nip round to wake the others," whispered Donovan, scrambling to his feet.

Wakened urgently and silently, the section were instantly on the alert. Staring into the black night, nerves on

edge, the trees appeared to take on human form, and it was all the weaker spirits could do to concentrate on the noise and disbelieve their eyes. Standing there with his Bren pressed to his hip ready to spit sudden death, Dave Rawnley called out desperately, "Halt. Who goes there?" The noise stopped and after a breathless silence a choking voice gave back the password. "Advance and be recognised," said Dave, his voice softer with relief. Not a man in the section moved as the intruder came toward them.

"It's me, Woods. Timber Woods," he called. "Thank God I've found you. Timber Woods of No. 3 Platoon. Don't shoot."

"O.K., it's Timber all right," said Dave as they came face to face, and then the section crowded round gleefully, eager to get some good news from their nocturnal visitor.

Timber sank wearily to the ground. "Thank God I've found you," he repeated. "Been running and walking for ages. Thought I'd never find you," and he passed out, into a sleep of deep exhaustion.

"Thank God he's found us. How does he mean, found us?" Stormy asked dejectedly. He uttered a harsh laugh. "Ugh! Found us! Timber, you're going to get a shock when you come to. You've found us O.K., but you're still ruddy lost." He cackled at his own joke and gave Hoppy a playful push.

"Gormless devil, raising our 'opes like that," muttered Hoppy. "They're all a deadly crowd in No. 3 Platoon anyway."

Robbo was leaning against a tree, laughing. "Carn' 'elp larfin', mate," he told Stormy. "I'd've given a quid to 'ave seen our faces just nar. Almost 'eard 'em drop," and he went into another fit of silent laughter.

"Two of you carry Woods over here and wrap a blanket round him," said the corporal. "It'll be light soon, so the rest of us will stand-to. You can take it in turn to pack

your kit because we're moving off as soon as it's light enough."

The daylight lifted their spirits and they all spoke hopefully of rejoining their friends again, but when Donovan went over to wake Timber he shook his head sadly. "This chap won't be able to walk for a while," he said. "By the feel of him he's got a fever, malaria probably, and he looks about all in."

Their eyes avoided him as he glanced round. "Someone will have to stay behind to look after him while we push on. If we find the column I give my word that somebody will come to fetch you, and if we don't I'll pick you up later on. Now, who's going to stay?"

There was an awkward silence for a second or two until Evans said, "Chalky and me can do with a bit of a rest, can't we, buddy, but Kachindit stays with us."

"Right, Don. You'll be O.K., and we'll be back in a couple of days at the most."

Relieving a protesting Hoppy of the dead chicken, he tossed it to Evans. "When Timber comes round, make sure he eats some of it and takes two or three atabrine tablets to keep that fever down. Look after yourselves," he said, turning to go.

"So-long," Chalky called after them, "and mind the trams."

Leaving Kachindit to keep an eye on Timber, Evans and his pal spent the morning prowling round the immediate area and discussing the turn events had taken. When they returned, Evans and the villager started preparing the chicken for dinner while Chalky went down to the river for water.

The chicken was stuffed with rice and surrounded with sweet potatoes and onions, with bouillon powders and curry to flavour, and soon a luscious meal was ready and they awoke Timber.

The smell from the cooking had sharpened his appetite and he sat there with a mess-tin of rice gruel and a few succulent pieces of tender chicken before him, telling his story.

The column had continued to take things easy after the railway party and the track patrols had left camp; but when Harry Colgrave and the Burrif had returned in the early hours and seen the major there was a bit of a flap. The perimeter was drawn tighter and one of the platoons was sent out to keep a check on the tracks leading into the area. Timber heard later that wireless contact was made that night with the railway party and they were ordered to abandon that job and return to the column at once. Timber had been suffering from a bad attack of malaria all that day but he was still with his platoon.

With one platoon out on floater patrols and the railway party absent, there were only two infantry platoons left in the bivouac, and they were placed one at the point of the perimeter where the Japs were expected to attack and the other in general reserve. The remainder of the perimeter guard was formed from the soft elements; muleteers, signallers, intelligence, etc.

About mid-morning they heard firing break out some distance away and presumed that Donovan's section were in trouble. Shortly afterwards the Japs ran into an ambush prepared by one of the sections from the floater platoon, and were held up for a little time before they steamrolled the section out of existence. The remaining floater patrols were in action by this time, for the enemy were advancing down the other tracks and infiltrating through the jungle. Two of the sections from the floater platoon had just retired to the bivouac when the main enemy attack was put in. The remaining section was still fighting some distance away and managed to hold the Japs off right to the end of the engagement when they rejoined the column.

The Japs threw in wave after wave of tropical orderly, frontal assaults, but the attacks were all broke Scrounger" by flame-throwers and mortars. The reserve it and see been thrown in at No. 3 Platoon's section ofnd on the far to stem the main thrust, and when the Japs a; over a body, from the left flank, at the same time pushg the forehead frontal assault, there was no reserve to congy Bell had the flank, was pierced. The soft elemen join Tommy. fought well, genorally, but a few of thechers, suddenly fled to the river. Fierce hand-to-hand fighty's back. going on when Column H.Q., led by the majid, "Drop wild charge and succeeded in re-establishing t.

Before the enemy could regroup, the ra: face ashen appeared on the scene and caught them in the scrambled heavy casualties. The Japs withdrew in the face t plate, attack and the column formed up and moved off at top speed.

"How did you come to get left behind?" asked Chalky.

"Well, our platoon was ordered to cover the column's rear, and the Japs, who weren't letting go so easily, soon reformed and came after us. We had a lovely ambush ready for them and held them off for a long time, but there were so many of the devils that we couldn't hope to keep them off altogether. We started withdrawing by sections when they attacked again and surrounded ours, and we tried to bayonet our way out. It didn't quite come off, but I managed to bash my way through them and ran like hell. After running for miles, so it seemed, I realised I was hopelessly lost. I was still trying to find the column when I bumped into you last night. What about you?" he asked.

After they had explain to Timber what had happened to their section during the past forty-eight hours, Chalky and Evans decided to pay a visit to the battle area to see if anything useful had been left behind. Determined not to be

The smell this time, Kachindit went along too. They and he sat reaching the old column bivouac area very succulent pieces, then Chalky, who was some way ahead, stopped story, dropping to the ground, motioned to the

The column, quiet. After listening for a while he crept railway party and, perched that he could hear voices somewhere Harry Colgrave not distinguish any words.

hours and seen, "Now you understood the Jap lingo anyway," perimeter was, "Comon, let's make our way back now."

sent out to keep, they had got the better of Chalky and he wanted Timber he was talking. Eventually he persuaded Evans to night with him. "I suppose I'll get killed anyway, so it abandon that, it'll be now as in two or three weeks' time after had been, I'll all over the blasted jungle," he muttered day after day.

Edging slowly forward and dodging from tree to tree they were soon close enough to make out the language as their own, and Chalky was about to rush forward when Evans pulled him down. "Look, pal," he whispered, "I've told you many a time that my dad got a medal and I'm after one, too. If you go and get yourself killed that easily who's going to give evidence on my behalf?"

"But they're our blokes," began Chalky when Evans interrupted him.

"They might be, and then again they might not. You know these Jap Johnnies often come out with phrases in English. Anyway I want to see who it is first."

Seeing the logic of his friend's remark Chalky offered no further objection and, following his example, squirmed forward on his stomach.

There appeared to be some argument taking place, for the voices were raised in anger. Then a quieter voice broke in and Chalky's heart leapt as he recognised it as belonging to his pal Tommy Culshaw, a young muleteer. Peering through the grass and bushes into a small clearing

they saw Lance-Corporal Dingy Bell, a medical orderly, his face very flushed, telling big Johnny Aston, "Scrounger" to those who knew him, to go if he felt like it and see where it got him. Chalky glanced round and on the far side of the clearing he saw Tommy bending over a body, apparently still living, for he was mopping the forehead with his handkerchief. Meanwhile Dingy Bell had finished saying his piece and turned to join Tommy. Scrounger, who had his back toward the watchers, suddenly whipped out his machete and leapt on to Dingy's back.

Evans never moved, but in a clear voice he said, "Drop that, you've gone far enough."

The result was electrifying. Scrounger, his face ashen and his eyes almost bursting from their sockets, scrambled off Dingy like a beetle that has jumped on to a hot plate, and crouched ready to bolt. Dingy spun round and clambered to his feet as Culshaw made a sudden dive for his Sten gun.

When the two friends stepped into the clearing, Evans stooped to pick up the fallen machete. Recognising their visitors as friends, Scrounger and company recovered a little from their shock and ran over to them, their faces lighting up with relief.

Evans stopped their chattering and, going up to Scrounger, he grabbed his long red beard and quickly cut off a lock with the machete. Putting it back in its scabbard he said quietly, "Sharp, isn't it. You want to watch it, man, or you'll be hurting someone."

A groan came from the wounded man and the newcomers stepped over and saw a wan-faced young signaller, Bill Harding, his lips drawn back from his gums with pain. The stretcher, constructed of a ground sheet stretched over a bamboo frame, was tinged brown across the lower half and blood still ran freely from a gaping wound in his thigh.

"How'd it happen?" asked Chalky.

They looked at each other awkwardly for a moment or two before Dingy answered hesitatingly that they had been running and Harding must have had the safety catch off. They had come to a dried-up stream, and as they jumped down the bank Bill's rifle had gone off and the bullet had smashed into his thigh and out again the other side, leaving a jagged hole which their field dressing had been too small to stop up.

"Must have been pretty careless handling a rifle like that," observed Chalky when he heard the story.

"I wouldn't say he was careless so much as scared stiff," replied Evans. "How did you blokes get separated from the column anyway?" he asked. Again there was that strained silence while they looked shiftlessly at the ground. "I get it, Chalky. These so-called soldiers are the ones who ran away when the Japs broke the perimeter."

The derision in his voice stung Dingy into reply. "Watch what you're saying, Evans; we haven't all been in the army all our lives you know. And don't forget that I'm the N.C.O. here," he added lamely.

Evans laughed. "Listen to the lance-comical talking," he mimicked, placing his hand on his hip. "And a ruddy fine one you are by the looks of things."

Before the quarrel got out of hand Chalky butted in. "It won't help matters by bringing that up, Don, so forget it both of you and don't let's stand here arguing or the Japs will be copping the lot of us."

Mention of the Japs brought them all back to earth again, and they decided to carry Bill Harding over to the hide-out where Timber must be waiting rather anxiously.

Tommy, Dingy and Scrounger got a shock when, just as they were ready to start, Evans whistled and a grinning Kachindit appeared. Evans led the way while Chalky and Kachindit carried the stretcher. Culshaw marched

behind Chalky, and on the way told him that the three of them had been carrying Harding, and the argument they had interrupted had started because Scrounger refused to carry the stretcher any longer, but didn't fancy the idea of going off on his own as Dingy had suggested.

When they reached the hide-out Timber was nowhere to be seen, although the kit was still as they had left it. As they were laying the stretcher down he suddenly swung out of a tree and dropped beside them. "Heard someone coming and thought it might be the yellow-bellies," he explained.

While Evans, who, as the oldest soldier, had now been acknowledged as leader of the party, posted guards, Dingy set about cleaning and rebandaging Bill Harding's wound. "Unless he gets expert attention pretty soon he's had it, I'm afraid," he confided to Chalky who was helping. They finished the dressing without Harding regaining consciousness, and Chalky went over to Evans and suggested that as they had now used all their field dressings he should go and see if he could pick up any from the dead. His friend agreed to the plan and sent Kachindit along as well.

The stench from the dead men and animals was nauseating. The bodies were already bloated and looked ready to burst. At the sight of them, Chalky was overcome with revulsion and wished he had never thought of coming back, for beetles with horrible blue-black shiny bodies crawled over the corpses and hung from the nearby trees. It was too much for Chalky, so, indicating what he wanted doing, he left the dirty work to Kachindit while he prowled around the area.

"Four packs full of food, some quinine tablets from a dead Jap, a canister full of explosives and detonators, one pair of field glasses, one Jap light automatic, three rifles and two Sten guns," announced a gleeful Chalky to Kachindit.

"I feel like a ruddy quartermaster with all this lot. We'd better be getting back now, though, before it gets dark."

A bamboo pole slung between their shoulders loaded with two of the packs, Chalky carrying the canister of explosives and Kachindit the automatic and binoculars, they cheerfully made their way back to the others, having hidden the remainder of the booty.

That night it poured with rain and reminded them that the monsoons would soon be upon them, a not very cheerful thought. By lacing their groundsheets tightly round themselves they managed to get some sleep in without getting unduly wet, but the rain brought out the mosquitoes and, as most of them had long since discarded their head-nets and gloves, they spent a very uncomfortable hour or so before sleep finally overcame them.

They risked lighting a fire for breakfast, mainly because there was still a little chicken gruel left for Bill Harding who had recovered consciousness but looked extremely ill. It started to rain again, very heavily, shortly after breakfast, so Evans set Kachindit to making a bamboo shelter for the sick man while the others rigged up lean-to shelters with the aid of their groundsheets. Apart from guard duties the day was spent resting, and Evans took the opportunity to teach Kachindit a little English, and a very apt pupil he proved, especially so far as the weapons were concerned. Early the next day Evans and Kachindit set out to meet Donovan's party, while Chalky, Culshaw and Scrounger went to fetch the remainder of the booty into camp.

Chapter 3

IT was towards noon when Evans brought Donovan and his party in, and in spite of the corporal's forced cheerfulness they could see that he had missed the column.

Evans had explained to Donovan what had taken place during his absence, and after a brief word to the others the corporal hurried over to where Dingy Bell was waving his hand to keep the flies away from the wound, while Harding lay with his eyes closed, breathing heavily.

Donovan looked enquiringly towards Dingy who slowly shook his head. Harding opened his eyes on hearing the new voices, and Donovan knelt beside him and said cheerfully, "Well, Bill, you're a fine one shooting yourself. What are you trying to do, get your ticket? Anyway, we'll soon have you out of here and in a nice clean bed in hospital in India, and you'll be bragging to the sisters that as you couldn't find any Japs to shoot at in Burma you had to shoot yourself."

"You wouldn't kid a chap, would you?" whispered Harding, and started to smile, then quickly clenched his teeth and closed his eyes again as a fresh pain drew his mouth down.

Donovan slowly got to his feet and, after taking his kit off, he called everyone round him. After explaining that by the state of the tracks the column had not apparently gone to the rendezvous, and although he had waited there for some hours they had still not shown up, he had come to the conclusion that they must have presumed that his section had been overrun by the Japs. As the railway party had already joined them there was, therefore, no reason

for them to go to the rendezvous, but on the off-chance that something had held the column up he had left a message by the track giving their present position. That message may be found by the Japs, but as he thought that it would take them some time to understand it he proposed to take a risk and stay here until the following day.

He then gave them what he thought were the reasonable alternatives they could adopt, and after telling them that their only chance lay in sticking together he let each one voice his own opinion.

For an hour or more they argued amongst themselves, but in the end Donovan, with the support of Stormy, Evans and Chalky, brought the majority round to his scheme for heading north to Stilwell. Some of them did not approve of his idea about having a crack at the Japs on the way, but thought that they should avoid contact with them as much as possible. Donovan wouldn't hear of this, reminding them that had they still been with the column they would have had to fight and possibly get killed. It was their job to fight, and he didn't see why they should not carry that job out just because they happened to be cut off for a while. "When you're old men how can you boast that you were in Donovan's Private Army? And when your kids ask how many Japs you killed you can only say, 'None, but we ran a helluva lot faster than they did,'" he told them amid laughter.

But it was Jack Roberts who settled the issue. "You're like a lot of old wimmin'," he said, spitting scornfully into the ground. "These bastards 'ave got my bruvver a prisoner somewhere and you've all heard what those blokes are being treated like. They'd swap places wiv us and fink they was on a ruddy Sunday School picnic, those blokes would, and 'ere you are moanin' abaht it. I'm gonna fight wevver you blokes do or ya don't, an' I don't care if they kills me so long as I take some of the bleeders wiv me."

He pushed his rifle forward. "There's two notches there nar, but when I've finished there'll be no butt left to put any more on."

After they had eaten a meal Donovan sorted out the rations and weapons, and divided them as equally as possible. Two of the surplus rifles and the Sten-guns were buried, and so would the explosive have been, but Chalky was so insistent on taking it along that Donovan finally gave him his wish after telling him that he would soon be glad to bury it on account of the weight. After announcing that from then on rations were to be pooled and cut down to make them last as long as possible, the corporal told those not on guard to get as much rest as they could for they had some hard marching in front of them.

He and Stormy then went off together to make a quick survey of their surroundings and they were some distance from the river when Stormy quickly pulled Donovan behind a clump of bamboo. The nearest Jap was about ten yards away and so well camouflaged that the corporal didn't see him until he darted swiftly across a break in the trees. Quickly sweeping the area with his newly acquired binoculars, he whispered, "Must be a whole platoon of them. Well spread out, too. They must have trailed us somehow."

The Jap Stormy had first seen was heading straight for them, some way ahead of his comrades, and Donovan slowly got to his feet and drew his knife. Like an animal the Jap glided past them and whirled round as the piece of wood the corporal threw rustled in the grass. Donovan leapt on him and got a choking grip with his left arm and as they rolled over he locked his legs round the Jap and plunged the knife into his ribs. He doubled up with the shock and Donovan stabbed wildly at him again and again, till the body sagged in his arms. Dropping the knife, he rolled the Jap on to his back and grabbed at his throat.

Stormy had to force Donovan's head back to make him release his grip. "For God's sake, Bob, he's dead. You've killed him. We've got to run now before the rest see us."

Shaking his head to clear the black mist which seemed to be enveloping him, Donovan got slowly to his feet and would have stood there had not Stormy pulled him away. They moved cautiously but swiftly, darting from tree to tree until they felt safe enough to run.

"You've killed him ! You've killed him !" the pounding in his head kept saying. "You, Donovan, have killed a man with your knife. It was easy, wasn't it ? Two or three seconds and he was dead. And you liked it, didn't you ? You didn't want him to die so easily because you liked it, and you wanted to kill again."

Donovan glanced down at his clenched hands and, seeing the blood on them, he stopped, suddenly cold with fear.

"Don't stop, Corp, we're nearly there now," said Stormy coming back to him and thrusting his rifle into his bloody hands.

They ran on again, and as the cold sweat left him Donovan saw before him the image of his wife as she said very clearly, "If it's a girl we'll call her Susan. You like that, don't you, Bob ?" He laughed aloud and felt quite normal again.

The others had heard them coming and were grabbing for their weapons as they rushed into the clearing.

"Quick, get your kit and head for the river," panted the corporal. "Robbo and you, Tommy, get the stretcher and move off now ; we'll bring your kit on. Dave, you cover us with the Bren until we're halfway across, then follow us. Chalky, you stay with him. Stormy, see that they get Harding over as quickly as possible."

Roberts, Culshaw and Stormy were a quarter of the way across the river when the others reached the bank. Sending them scrambling down into the water Donovan

called after them, "Two of you relieve them with that stretcher," and he turned to put Rawnley and Chalky into position before splashing his way after them.

He had just caught up and was urging a lagging Hoppy to move faster when the Bren gun burst into life behind him and there was no further need to urge.

"Don, hang on where you are," he shouted to Evans. "Think you can fire your grenade-discharger from the water?" And as Evans nodded, "Range one hundred and keep it steady, we don't want to hit Dave and Chalky."

The main body were almost at the far side when there came a prolonged burst from the Bren gun and the crash of a grenade, then Dave and Chalky came slithering down the bank and forced their way through the water.

There was a sharp crack, followed by a dull explosion, as Evans fired the first grenade. The echoes were still reverberating amongst the trees when the jungle uprooted itself before Donovan's eyes and there was a blinding orange flash followed by a deafening crash. Through the quivering air he saw Dave and Chalky flung forward in the water and then the blast clawed at him, almost forcing him off balance. The other two got to their feet and plunged toward him. Together they made their way to the bank where the rest of the section were waiting. Taking up defensive positions, they waited for the Japs to cross the river while Chalky explained to Donovan that there seemed to be so many coming at them that he didn't think Dave and he had much chance to make their getaway, so he left a stick of explosive on a short fuse to delay them a little.

"It certainly did the trick, but you were very lucky to get off so easily yourselves," commented Donovan, as he wiped the blood from his hands.

"Figured the high banking would save us, Corp," said Chalky. "You seem to have been in a bit of a mess

yourself, though," he went on. "What happened to you two?"

Stormy broke in. "It was just like the cinema. Bob here used one of the oldest tricks in the world by throwing a stick to distract the Jap's attention and it worked beautifully." He was in the process of relating the gory details of the fight, coloured a little by his imagination, when Hoppy ran crouching to Donovan.

"Corp, they're crossing up yon'," he said, pointing upstream. "'Bout fifteen of 'em."

Detailing Stormy to take the Bren section along to meet this new threat to their flank, Donovan alerted the remainder for a frontal attack, as he felt that the main danger still lay in that direction.

He was becoming rather puzzled about the Japs' lack of initiative in front when Stormy's section opened fire to his left and were immediately engaged by the enemy.

Squirming forward on his stomach he made his way toward a small promontory jutting out into the river. Evans turned to him, eyes shining with excitement, as he approached. "They've caught them a treat," he said as Donovan carefully peered through the bushes and grass and saw fifty or sixty yards upstream the remnants of the Jap force still doggedly trying to force a crossing while Stormy's section cut them to pieces.

"Look out, Corp, here come the others," called Evans, tugging at his shirt.

About a dozen Japs had slid down the far bank and into the water and were making their way across the river.

"Don't fire until I give the word," said Donovan. "They probably think we've all moved up to stop the others crossing and expect to have things easy here, so we should be able to upset their little game."

The enemy were almost at the bank when he gave the order to fire, and with the first volley three or four of them

went down before the remainder scattered. The weight of the water prevented them from moving very fast, and a second fusillade from Donovans' party hit two more. One of the Japs started to go back, his nerve broken, and the panic swiftly spread to the others.

Hoppy whooped for joy and, jumping up, ran for the river's edge firing shot after shot after the retreating figures. They stopped firing for fear of hitting him, Donovan shouting to him to get down. There was a sharp report and Hoppy swung round, dropped his gun, clutched his left arm and fell to the ground. Timber Woods immediately dashed forward, and they saw a wounded Jap roll over the bank into the water as his Sten-gun stuttered out a short burst. Dragging Hoppy back under cover they tore away his shirt sleeve, revealing two neat holes in his arm where the small calibre Jap bullet had passed clean through. Dingy Bell was finishing the bandaging when Stormy's section returned, jubilant with victory.

Donovan immediately gave the order to move away from the river, but Johnny Aston refused to go. "I'm not moving from here and missing the column to-morrow. I've 'ad enough of traipsing around with you, getting shot at."

"Since when have you been giving the orders around here?" asked the corporal quietly.

"I agree with him, Corp," muttered Tommy Culshaw. "We don't stand a dog's chance unless we rejoin the column."

Hoppy started whining, "They're right, Bob, we can't go on alone, and I've got to get this wound seen to. . . ."

"Shurrup all of you and listen to me. A fine chance you'd stand going back there now," indicating across the river. "That noise Chalky made with his damned explosive is enough to draw the Japs from miles around, and after the little trouble we've just stirred up they'll be round

here like flies round a jam-pot. And," he went on as Aston tried to interrupt, "even if the column had any intention of coming to look for us—but you might as well know that privately I don't hold out much hope—the major's got more sense than to walk into this particular lion's den now."

"Aw, let 'em go, Bob," said Evans. "They'll get themselves killed, and good riddance I say. Never did hold much with deserters."

A wildly swung blow from Aston finished his sentence, sending him sprawling to the ground. Before the others could make a move, Aston, his face contorted with rage, lashed at him with his boot, catching him a stinging blow on the thigh.

Donovan sprang forward and, dragging Aston away, he turned his rifle on him. "Any more funny business like that, Aston, and I'll shoot you. That goes for you others, too. I'm in command here, so you'll do as I say without any arguments. Now, let's get moving. You," to Aston, "help Lance-Corporal Gale with the stretcher."

Evans stood rubbing his thigh as Aston passed him. "I'll get you for this, Scrounger," he muttered.

The country was fairly level near the river, so to gain time Donovan decided to risk using the track. They had put quite a few miles between themselves and the river before halting for the night, darkness having overtaken them.

After eating a cold supper Dingy Bell went across to tell Donovan that he didn't think Bill Harding could last out much longer. He had been in considerable pain throughout the march, the constant movement not giving the wound a chance to heal.

"What am I to do?" asked Donovan. "We've got to keep moving to stay alive with those devils after us, so I'm not going to risk getting us all killed just for one man. I'm sorry, Dingy, because I like young Harding, but let's be

truthful, even if we were to rest for a while it wouldn't do a great deal of good. What he wants is hospital treatment and has done from the start."

Dingy had to agree with him. "Yes, I guess you're right, Corp," he sighed. "It's a damn shame really. Incidentally I thought I'd better let you know that Scrounger will want an eye keeping on him. He's already cursing about having to carry the stretcher; says it's slowing us down too much. Also I've noticed him talking very furtively to Hopkinson and young Culshaw at the halts we've made. He's got it in for you for threatening to shoot him. You know he's a bad egg, Donovan, so watch him."

"Thanks for telling me, Dingy, but I won't lose any sleep over him. He's certainly no good, but he's also yellow."

Chapter 4

SOME hours later Jack Roberts and Dave Rawnley were sitting close together at their listening post, the latter resting his head on Roberts' shoulder while he had a little doze. Roberts had one leg partly tucked away underneath him, leaning forward slightly on his rifle which poked over his left shoulder. His outstretched foot almost touched the Bren gun, which stood a little askew on the bipod legs. Occasionally an inquisitive mosquito zoomed in his ear; lazily he lifted his hand to brush it away. The action was purely automatic, failing to interfere with his thoughts of what the family and his girl friend would be doing right now. Like the others he cursed these guards every night, dog-tired as he was, but realised that it was the only time he had the opportunity to think about home in peace.

It was hard to sit still and quiet, concentrating on the surrounding bushes, for very long. Nothing ever happened at night anyway. If you stared at them hard enough the trees appeared to take on human form ; one's eyes ached trying to bring them back into correct focus. It was better to close them and start all over again, but once close them and you found yourself fighting against that all-powerful sleep to get them open once more.

After you'd been on guard for a while, however, your eyes ignored the trees and mirrored instead those thoughts of home ; the drab street of terraced houses snuggling close together as if for warmth took on a wonderfully inviting aspect in one's memory—although in actual fact he had always hated the place and determined to get out of it as soon as possible. On many a cold winter's night he and Beryl had held each other close in old Mrs. Dawson's shop doorway while they planned their dreams of the future. She was a grand girl, his Beryl, and some day he hoped to marry her.

His thoughts drifted on to his favourite subject, the hero's welcome she would give him when he eventually got home. In his mind's eye he could see them walking down the street together, she clinging tightly to one arm, gazing lovingly up at him as he strolled manfully along, his kit-bag slung nonchalantly over one shoulder, smiling acknowledgements to the neighbours' shouts of welcome.

Suddenly Rawnley's head slipped off his shoulder. He awoke with a start and asked, "Have I been asleep long ?" rubbing his eyes with both hands.

"Dunno, cock, you've got the ticker," Roberts replied, flexing his outstretched leg which he noticed felt cold and a little stiff.

Peering closely at the luminous dial of the wrist watch Rawnley exclaimed, "Good Lord, is that all it is ? We've barely started. Time doesn't half stand still on this job."

He held the watch close to his ear to make sure it was still functioning.

"Fink I'll stretch me legs a bit. It gets cold at nights nar." Roberts walked off, picking his way carefully by the faint light of the pale moon which showed up the tree roots and fallen branches sufficiently for him to step over them.

Rawnley stretched himself so hard that a fleeting giddiness overcame him. Relaxing again, he reached for the Bren gun and drew it toward him just as he heard Roberts returning. "By heck that was a quick . . ." he began, but stopped when he noticed Roberts's stealthy approach.

"Japs. Stay 'ere wiv the Bren while I wakes the uvvers."

"Stay here with the Bren while I wake the others," repeated Rawnley inwardly as he took a firmer grip on the gun. "Never says where I'm to look for the Japs. Anyway, if they move and I keep still I should see them first." He crept silently over to the shadow of a big tree and lay huddled there, peering anxiously at the bushes in front, wondering what was keeping the remainder of the section.

Meanwhile Roberts strode cautiously toward the dark humps which represented his sleeping comrades wrapped in their blankets, glancing furtively behind him, expecting with every step to hear the Bren gun burst into life. So intent was he on looking back that he stumbled over the first figure before realising he was upon it. Luckily it was Evans who sat up quite calmly as if it were a common occurrence for someone to walk over his bed in the middle of the night. "That you, Robbo?" he exclaimed. "You clumsy devil, why don't you open your eyes and look where you're walking."

"Ssssh," hissed Roberts, waving his hand frantically in the air to urge him to shut up. "They're comin' this way searchin' for us. 'Elp me wake the uvvers."

"Who's coming?"

"Ruddy Japs, of course. Who'd'ya fink?"

Eventually they were all awake and moved up to join Rawnley. "Where've you been?" he asked. "I thought you'd buzzed off and left me you've been so long."

"Come off it, it's only a couple of minutes since Robbo woke us and we've had to pack up. Here's yôur kit, by the way. Seen anything of them yet?"

"No, but I've heard them. They're only moving slowly as if definitely looking for someone and they seem pretty well spread out."

"I can hear them myself now. They seem to be moving this way parallel to the track. Have you heard anything from behind us?"

"Not a sound."

"Good. We may be able to sneak away if we're quiet."

Stormy crawled over to them and squatted down. "What are we going to do, keep in a bunch or spread out? I think it may be better for us to stick close together and they will probably pass us by altogether in the dark."

"Why bother waiting for them to come? The best thing we can do is to get out of here. . . ."

"Psst!"

They stopped talking and spun round at the sound. Timber Woods lifted himself slightly on one elbow and motioned in front. Following his pointing finger they beheld the unmistakable, and now all too familiar, figure of a Jap standing barely five yards away, glancing around him into the shadows. Even as they watched another figure emerged from the bushes to join him, then still another. They made no immediate attempt to move but stood talking together in whispers.

Donovan placed his lips against Stormy's ear and spoke so softly that the words were barely audible. "Get ready to take the stretcher if we have to make a fight of it." Dave here will give you a hand while I take the Bren. Make

back toward the river and if we don't catch you up we'll meet at last night's bivouac about dusk to-morrow."

One of the Japs shuffled his foot to clear away the dead leaves before sitting down. Glancing anxiously around to make sure they were unobserved the other two joined the first who had taken a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. Huddled together, shielding the cigarettes in their high-crowned soft hats, they sat talking softly.

"Scrounging," thought Donovan, "just as we do. Funny, I hadn't thought they were like us." He spread his legs a little more comfortably and peered along the rifle held steady in his hands; one of the Japs was a black smudge on the end of the barrel. "Move and you're dead," said Donovan to himself. "Wish I understood what you are talking about—still, it's probably women." He shifted his gaze to ease the strain on his eyes but kept his rifle in position.

From behind and slightly to the right a bird whistled shrilly. Its effect on the Japs was electric. Leaping to their feet with a sudden exclamation they made off toward the sound at a run, stamping out their cigarettes as they did so. One of them, in trying to push past the others, almost trod upon Roberts and sprawled, cursing, into a bush as he tripped over some obstruction.

The first sound when they had gone was a soft giggle from the little Cockney. "Tripped over me 'perishin' rifle an' never knew it," he spluttered.

"They'd probably die of fright if they only knew how close to death they've been these past few minutes," Stormy said quietly. "Are we going to push on now they've passed us, Bob?"

"No I reckon not," came a slow, steady reply from the shadows of a bush. "No, I guess we'll stay right here. Those monkeys are supposed to have covered this area so it's unlikely they'll be back this way and they may have

left a rearguard on the track. We're not moving but we'll double the guard. We can't hope for such luck a second time."

The remainder of the night passed peacefully, and after the dawn stand-to Donovan gathered them round him and, spreading his map on the ground, showed them that the country 'round the river was too dangerous for a small party like themselves, as apart from the waterway being one of the main Jap supply routes, the railway, against which the main Chindit forces were operating, ran through the valley. He was going to make for the hills where they should be comparatively safe and could rest up a little while. As the monsoons had not yet properly started, water was going to be their main problem, so he was sending Evans and Kachindit off to find a suitable area, near water, where they could bivvy for the night. Over breakfast he pointed out the route he would take to Evans, and immediately the meal was over he and Kachindit set off.

About mid-morning they started to climb small, but steep, foothills where only coarse grass and stunted bushes covered the rocky ground. Flank guards were put out in addition to the forward scout. These moves left only seven of them to take turns with the stretcher, for Hoppy's arm had stiffened up during the night, rendering him useless either for stretcher-bearing or scouting.

With no trees to shield them the sun blazed down on their weary bodies as they plodded slowly up and down the hills, their studded boots slipping on the rocks. Although Donovan changed the stretcher party as often as possible they were soon almost on the verge of exhaustion. He was forced to halt frequently, and soon realised that they could never cover the distance he had set out to. His main fear was for Evans, and he could only hope that he would realise their plight and wait for them next day. Knowing Evans, he concluded that he would most likely

be all right, especially as he had Kachindit with him. The sun grew still warmer, and by noon Bill Harding, who had caught the full heat, was rambling deliriously about home. At the first decent shade they came to the corporal reluctantly called a halt until the sun had lost some of its power.

They had drunk the last of their water during the march, so he sent them off in all directions to see if they could find any. The search was unsuccessful, but Tommy Culshaw reported a dried-up chaung not far away.

Leaving Chalky with Bill Harding, Donovan took the others with him. The sandy bottom was bone dry, but choosing a spot overshadowed by trees, Donovan began to dig feverishly with his entrenching spade until, about three feet down, a thin trickle of water began to seep into the hole. A cheer went up from the watchers' parched throats when they saw it. Donovan cut some large leaves from a nearby bush and very carefully lined the bottom of the hole, making sure that as little sand as possible sprinkled in. Slowly the water filled the hole to a depth of a few inches and, dipping his mug in carefully, he took a sip. "Lovely! Worth a quid a mugful," he announced, smacking his lips. "Come on, lads, get digging." The injunction was unnecessary for they were already down on their knees scooping away the sand to get at the precious liquid.

Having filled all the chaguls and water bottles they set about preparing a hot meal, the fires being laid in concealed hollows. There was very little danger of the Japs spotting them for the wood was dry and the sun's rays neutralised the light of the flames. Dingy Bell made a bouillon powder soup and forced some of the warm fluid between Harding's lips. The food revived him a little and he asked weakly for a cigarette which the corporal gave to him in spite of Dingy's shaking head. After a few puffs the smoke brought on a fit of coughing which wracked his body, causing the

blood to ooze from his wound afresh. When it was over he sighed deeply and passed again into unconsciousness, the cigarette falling from his slack fingers.

Dingy glanced reproachfully at Donovan. "He hasn't got long left now, poor devil, so we might as well let him have his wishes, Dingy. It's the least we can do for him." Tears came into Dingy's eyes, mingling with the sweat and dust, to run down his cheeks unheeded as he tenderly placed a cool rag across Bill's feverish forehead. Donovan walked slowly away.

Refreshed after their long rest they marched again about 3 o'clock, Donovan forcing the pace, for the sky was clouded over heralding a monsoon storm, and he was anxious to get as far as possible toward their goal before it broke.

They soon tired again and were laboriously picking their way between the broken rocks at the bottom of a hill when Culshaw stumbled and sprawled on his face, the rifles he was carrying clattering on the rocks. As he made no effort to get up, Dingy went to him while Donovan halted the remainder. The stretcher was lowered and the bearers sank wearily to the ground, grateful for any excuse for a rest.

"Don't waste your time with him, Dingy, he's all right," said Donovan. "Now, come on, Culshaw, we're just as tired as you are but we keep going. You've got to pull your weight the same as everyone else. I'll have no malingering in this party."

"I'm sick, Corp. Honest I am. I feel deadly."

"His pulse is a bit queer, Corp," said Dingy. "Probably a touch of heat."

"Well, give him a mug of salt water to drink. We'll halt here for ten minutes everybody. Smoke if you want to, but don't drink any of your water for you'll most likely be glad of it later on."

He had barely finished speaking before the rain burst on them with tropical suddenness, drenching them to the skin. Getting to his feet, Roberts held his brew can to catch the drops, then strolled round chanting, "Water. Water. Luvly drinkin' water, tanner a mug."

"O.K., Robbo. No need for the ad-dabs, you can drink," said Donovan laughing.

Having fixed a groundsheet over the stretcher to keep off some of the rain, they marched on until darkness forced them to halt.

Miserable and short-tempered, their clothes covered with mud, they halted at the base of a hill down which ran rivulets of water. From the bushes they cut four strong Y-pieces to stand the stretcher on. That done, they sat on their packs eating a cold supper, for they were far too tired to be bothered attempting to light a fire with the wet wood.

Donovan pushed on, taking a volubly protesting Chalky along, to see if he could spot anything of Evans and Kachindit.

Scrounger was sitting with Hoppy and Culshaw some distance from the others, their heads together in whispered conversation. Timber strolled across to ask Hoppy if he would swap a fruit bar for a chocolate bar and got a "Buzz off, you, we're busy," growled at him by Scrounger.

Stormy called to Culshaw that it was time for him to mount guard, but instead of doing so, all three got to their feet and walked slowly over, Culshaw and Hoppy hanging back a little.

"Me an' my buddies 'ere 'ave got something we want to say," began Scrounger falteringly. "It's about this 'ere stretcher. We reckon that he can't live much longer anyway, an' don't see why we should carry him any farther, risking our necks as we are." He stopped, not knowing quite how to follow on.

There was silence for a moment, everyone looking at Stormy who drew on his cigarette and stared at the end glowing in his cupped hands. "If that's all you've got to say, you snake, you can crawl back in your hole," he said, looking directly at Scrounger who started forward a pace, his fists clenched.

"Oh no you don't, Mr. Clever Lance Comical. You don't brush Johnny Aston and his friends off so easily, because I'm telling you 'ere an' now that we're not going to carry that blasted stretcher any longer."

"We're done in, Stormy. We just can't carry it any more," put in Hoppy pathetically.

He winced at the scorn in Stormy's voice as he snapped, "Close it, Hoppy, you haven't been doing any carrying anyway."

They were all on their feet now, some arguing amongst themselves, but at the same time keeping an eye on the two main antagonists.

"Don't think I'm the only one what's fed up of carrying it," said Scrounger, "the others are just the same. Aren't you?" he asked, turning to include them all. There were a few inaudible mumbles. "Well, come on, say so. Don't be afraid of him," crooking his thumb at Stormy. "I've 'eard you all cursing all day about it."

"Course we've bin grumblin'," said Roberts. "We're orlways grumblin', but it don't mean we'd even fink abaht leavin' the poor ole cock."

"Who said anything about leaving 'im? You don't think I'd just leave 'im, d'ya? As he's dying anyway I suggest we shoot 'im and put 'im out of his misery as well as saving us a lot of graft. It's a shame to keep him living, all the pain he's in."

"Very clever, you big callous brute. You'd scream your rotten head off if it were you," Stormy said, pushing toward Scrounger.

Dingy stepped between them before they could get to blows. "Listen to me, all of you. You all know Bill and I are great friends. We come from the same town and joined up together. I've heard what you've all said and normally I would never hear of such a suggestion, but, although I hate to say it, I think it would be a blessing for poor Bill if he could be put out of all this pain, because he doesn't stand a chance of living, lost as we are. For his own sake it would probably be kinder to shoot him."

Stormy flopped down on to his pack again in the face of this rebuff from one whom he had thought his strongest supporter.

"There y'are, lads, even his best friend says we'd be doin' a good deed," said Scrounger, taking over the discussion. "Now the question is, who's going to do the shooting. The best way is to draw for it," he said, taking his matches out of his pocket, "and the one who gets the short one does the job."

Breaking off a match head he placed those he had counted out part way back into the box and shut it. Reluctantly they filed past and drew a match out while Scrounger puffed a cigarette and held the glowing end so that he could see who drew the broken match. Hoppy's turn came and, drawing out a match, he quickly glanced at it and drew back. "No, it's not me," he muttered.

"'Ere, let's have a look," growled Scrounger reaching for his hand. "You lousy cheat, of course you've got it."

"I can't do it," wailed Hoppy, trying to escape from Scrounger's grasp. "I tell you I can't do it. You suggested it, so you do it."

Scrounger gave him a slap across the ear. "Course you'll ruddy well do it. Can't let 'im go on in all that pain just 'cos you're yellow. It was a fair draw and we're holding you to it."

A low whistle startled them, making them grab for their

guns, as Donovan and Chalky returned, calling softly for their directions.

As the corporal freed himself from his pack he asked, "Corporal, why aren't the guards posted?"

"Well er . . . there's been a bit of trouble," began Stormy.

"Trouble! There will be trouble if you go on doing this sort of thing. Rawnley! Culshaw! Where's Culshaw? He's never here when he's wanted. Culshaw!" he called louder.

"I'm here, Corporal. Won't be a minute. I've got a touch of diarrhoea," replied a faint voice.

"You will have if the Japs catch you. Get a move on."

When the guards had been posted Donovan turned to Stormy. "Now what's this trouble you were on about?"

Having heard the whole story he walked over to Scrounger. "So big Johnny Aston's been getting funny again, has he. I'll tell you something, Aston. You're twice as big as most of these chaps and in consequence think you can throw your weight around, but I'd rather have any one of the others than two like you because you're as big a coward as they make 'em. Well, go on, tough guy, hit me. I would if someone said that to me." Scrounger made no move. "No, I'm just about your size, aren't I, and you don't like fighting big boys do you, you rat.

"I decide what's to be done and who is to do it, and I'll have no more talk of leaving or shooting your own mates or you'll wish to hell you hadn't said it—that goes for all of you. Sure I know we've had a hard day and there'll be lots of other hard days to come, worse by far than this, but you didn't expect to have things cushy on this job, did you? It's this rain and the darkness getting on your nerves a bit. Why, in the morning you'll feel as fit as fiddles and think you must have had a bad dream about this matter.

Bill's a pal of ours who's been very unlucky, but we'll see he's all right yet. Remember, some of you may be in Bill's position one day, so let's have no more of it. Pre-war you would have given hundreds of pounds for a conducted tour of Burma like this, and here you are grumbling. Now go and roll yourself into your nice cosy beds and dream of me."

He watched them go to their respective bed spaces and felt Stormy standing beside him. "You're a marvel, Donovan. Things were looking very black until you came, and in a few minutes you send them away laughing. If I'd only possessed your power to command, my life probably would not have been ruined as it is." Abruptly he turned and went off to his own bed.

Donovan was very tired so, before turning in, decided to allow himself the luxury of removing his boots. "He's a queer chap, Stormy," he thought. "I wonder what brought him here. He's obviously been brought up for a better life than soldiering in the ranks."

"Corporal Donovan." Donovan stopped unlacing his boots and listened. He was about to bend forward again when he heard it once more. "Corporal," came a faint voice. He got up and walked quietly round the sleeping figures. "It's me, Bill Harding," a voice whispered. Going over, Donovan found him propped up on his arm.

"Now, Bill, what's to do? Come on, lay down again," he said gently lowering him on to his back.

For a moment Harding lay still, gasping for breath. "I heard it all, Corp," he murmured, and Donovan had to bend forward to listen. "Thanks for what you said, but I know I'm dying." He paused, and Donovan started to speak, but Bill's hand gripped his arm and he fell silent again. "Would have been better to have let them shoot me. I don't want to hold you back."

"You're not holding us back, Bill. Why we are. . . ." Donovan stopped as that dry whisper came again.

"My watch . . . in the pack. Belonged to my dad. See that my mum gets it, Corp . . . and don't tell her how . . . I went out." Donovan felt him sag and reached for his wrist.

"Hardly any pulse-beat at all," he thought. "They'll be lucky to carry that stretcher in the morning." A long sigh escaped from his lips as he got up.

He was about to roll into his wet blanket when Dave Rawnley called to say that Culshaw wasn't so well and kept dashing into the bushes to pay his respects to nature. After changing the guard and seeing Culshaw to bed, Donovan finally managed to get to sleep. He seemed only to be asleep for a minute before a loud report penetrated his fuddled brain and caused him to jerk upright, his hands reaching for his rifle as he tried to force his eyes open and clear his mind. As he stumbled to his feet and called out he noticed that the others had left their beds and were crouching behind bushes.

"Good section," he thought. "No need to tell them where to go when they are attacked like this, and they don't flap either. Wonder how the Japs knew we were here?"

Timber tugged at his sleeve, peering into his face. "Corp?" he asked, and as Donovan grunted a reply he went on, "There's been an accident out there in those bushes. Bill Harding. Horrible mess from what I could see."

"Corporal Bell, come with me. You others stay where you are," Donovan called as he started forward. A few yards outside the bivouac he stumbled into Timber, who had halted and was looking round for him.

"Here you are, Corp," he said, pointing.

It was too dark to see much more than a black shape on the ground, so Donovan struck a match. As it flared up he gasped and stepped back. "My God, what a sight!" The match spluttered and burned his fingers. With an

oath he dropped it. Striking another, he called out for Dingy who was standing at his side. "Ugh! Didn't know you were here. Have a look at him if you like, but there's nothing you can do. Must have died immediately. I wonder how he managed to drag himself this far?"

Dingy shuddered as he got to his feet again. "Poor old Bill. Still, I suppose it was for the best," he sighed. "What are you going to do about his body, Corp?"

"Can't do anything till it gets light." He peered closely at his watch. "It's not quite 4 a.m., so we might as well get another hour's sleep before dawn. No need to say much to the others just yet, they'll see for themselves soon enough. Here, Woods, come on, get back to your post and don't start dozing in case any of those devils heard anything and come along to investigate."

Rolled in his blanket again, Donovan tried to sleep, but, physically tired though he was, thoughts of Bill's death and the plight of the remainder of the section chased each other through his mind and drove sleep away.

The others were awake too, for he could hear them tossing and turning in their efforts to find sleep. "Serves 'em right," he thought, "they drove him to it."

He was glad when the guard called them to stand-to, just before dawn.

It was a very dismal breakfast, even Robbo's humour was damped, and when everyone had finished the corporal went over to the stretcher and, taking the groundsheet away, he told Chalky and Roberts to get their entrenching spades to dig a grave while he and Dingy Bell prepared the body.

Apart from Culshaw, who had dashed off to pay another call, an insatiable curiosity made the others follow the corporal, to stand silently watching as he and Dingy gathered the remains in the groundsheet.

"Laid on a grenade," mused Donovan, almost to himself. "I wonder whose pouch he took it from?"

No one answered, but Scrounger went very red in the face and turned to go.

"Yours, eh?" said Donovan with a harsh laugh. "Well he certainly had a sense of humour right to the end."

Turning round, Scrounger snarled, "Well, go on, say it. Why don't you say I killed him? Curse him. That's what you're all thinking."

"You didn't kill him," replied the corporal quietly. "You aren't brave enough to have killed Bill Harding, Scrounger. But you helped all the same. You and your pals convinced him that he was holding us back, and rather than do that he killed himself. I know that some of you didn't think much of Bill because he ran away when the column was attacked and was so scared that he accidentally shot himself. Well, we all have our weak moments and that was Bill's, but he's made up for it in these past few days. He's been in dreadful pain, but while he was conscious has borne it all in silence, dying at the end like a soldier, sacrificing himself for us. That's how I'll remember Bill."

Chapter 5

THEY were a very sorrowful looking lot on the march that morning; all the usual grumbling and joking had been shocked out of them by the manner of Harding's death. Even the scouts had lost their customary alertness so that they failed to see the figures hiding in the bushes at the side of the track. They were allowed to pass by and only as the main party approached did Evans and Kachindit suddenly jump from hiding, causing them to fumble for their slung weapons.

"Got the lot of you," said Evans. "Bright lot you are

getting nabbed like that. The section goes to pot when I'm away I can see." He gazed around at the dull faces. "What's wrong with you all? You look as though you're going to a funeral or something."

"Just comin' back from one, cock," said Roberts.

"Bill's dead," Donovan told him. "We'll halt here for tiffin and I'll tell you the whole story while we eat."

Having heard the corporal out, Evans observed, "Well, if you carry on as you were doing this morning you'll all be joining Harding because there's Japs ahead." As they crowded round at the mention of Japs Evans sat back, pleased with the stir his announcement had caused.

"Well, what the hell are you grinning for?" asked Donovan. "Come on, out with it, what about the Japs?"

Evans put on a very hurt expression as he replied. "Hang on a bit, Corporal. There's no rush, you'll meet them soon enough. You see, when you didn't turn up last night I figured that rather than just sit waiting for you I might as well have a dekko ahead, so Kachindit here and myself went on early this morning, and three or four miles ahead we came to a clump of bamboo which Kachindit noticed had been recently cut. Being a very careful type of bloke I decided to get off the track and see what's cooking. While I'm telling Kachindit what I intend doing I see one of our friends appear carrying a mess-tin, and jump into a bunker just off the track. Thanking my lucky stars that Kachindit took his woodcraft lessons seriously I detour a little and come up behind the bunker. After watching for a while Kachindit and I come to the conclusion that there are only three men on guard, so the Japs must be feeling pretty safe. That being so, we decide to go on and see what they're guarding."

He paused to light a cigarette, laughing at their impatience.

"Just round the corner we dropped down into a valley

with a fairly wide river running through. On this side of the river is a village which the Japs have turned into some sort of headquarters. They've got the villagers working for them, for we saw some elephants crossing the river by a bridge, apparently carting some stuff into the jungle on the far side. The really big hills start on the other side of the river, so if you were thinking of heading into the hills this way, Corp, than I guess you will have to think again."

Donovan spread his map out. "Th're's the village," he said, pointing, "and there's the big hills you speak of, Don, four-thousand-footers, too. According to the map here, the only pass into those hills is across that bridge, as far as I can see. That means we've got to get across here or go back, and I'm not back-tracking because we'll run slap into trouble if we do. I wonder what the Japs are working on?"

"We can't stay here wondering, Bob," broke in Stormy, "because those Japs we bumped back there are probably on our tails, so if we've got to go forward, I say let's get going now before they warn those in the village about us."

They all agreed with Stormy's suggestion and, having finished their lunch, moved cautiously forward, Evans and Kachindit in the lead.

When Evans thought they were nearing the Jap outpost he halted, waiting for the section to catch up. The corporal told the others to keep off the track and wait there until he had had a look for himself.

Following Evans and Kachindit through the bushes, he was beginning to wonder if they had come too far when Kachindit dropped to the ground squirming his way forward. Donovan stayed with Evans who whispered, "Moves like a snake, Corp. They'll never see him." Donovan noticed the pride in his voice as he spoke of the native and thought it strange that two people so different could strike up such a friendship.

Worming his way back to them Kachindit pointed towards the track. "Japani," he said, beaming all over his face.

"Hear him, Corp? He's learning English fast, isn't he?" asked Evans.

"He's learning fast all right, but I don't know about English, sounds more like Urdu to me," replied Donovan. "Anyway, come on, let's have a look."

Through his binoculars he saw that Evans had been right, for the Jap guards were taking things very easy. "Should be able to slip past them all right," he thought.

Having brought the remainder past the Jap guard post safely, they proceeded toward the village, keeping away from the track so as not to leave tell-tale footprints.

Dropping down toward the river they saw through a break in the trees the whole scene laid before them. Mainly the huts sprawled along the river bank, but a few strayed up the hillside. There was little cultivated land to be seen, but nets spread out to dry on the bank showed the occupants of the village to be fishermen. The Japs appeared to have taken over most of the larger huts, for hastily thrown up shelters were dotted about the open spaces and in front of them could be seen the women-folk going about their daily tasks.

Jap sentries were lounging at either end of the timber bridge and others were moving about the village, but there didn't seem to be a great many of them.

As they watched, a string of three elephants crossed from the far side of the bridge, passing through the village before disappearing from view behind a small hill.

"There doesn't seem to be much chance of getting across unseen in daylight," said Donovan. "Our best chance is to wait for darkness and then try."

"How'd we get across the bridge though, because they'll most likely put extra guards on at night," ventured Culshaw.

"I vote we rush 'em now," Chalky blurted out. "We'll

take them by surprise and be across the bridge before they know it. Once across, we can dynamite the bridge to stop them following."

"You and your dynamite," said Dingy. "You'll get us all killed."

"Anyway, we're running short of ammunition," Donovan interjected, "and we don't know what to expect from the other side. Somehow or other we must get across without them knowing."

The elephants reappeared, the large paniers on their backs loaded with stones, and recrossed the bridge to disappear into the jungle on the far side.

"Why not swim across?" began Timber Woods, but Roberts cut him short.

"Not number one 'ere, 'cos I can't swim. We're not all blinking fish, mite, although it's 'ard to believe when I look at some of you lot."

"Can't we pinch a boat, Corp?" asked Evans.

"By jumbo! I've got it," yelled Dave Rawnley jumping to his feet with excitement. "The elephants! Why not cross in daylight in those paniers!"

"By jumbo is right, Dave," laughed Donovan. "It's such a damned cheeky idea it might just come off, if we can get the mahouts on our side. We'll sneak down right away and see what we can do about it."

They reached the small hill without being seen. Leaving the others hidden in a large clump of bamboo, the corporal and Rawnley went to see what lay beyond. The jungle was very dense here owing to the nearness of the river, and for some distance on the far side of the hill the path taken by the elephants continued through a leafy hall of gloom. Hearing hammering and voices just ahead, they crept silently from tree to tree until they came to a large clearing where natives were busy breaking rocks under the supervision of half a dozen armed Japs.

One of the workers paused for a breather and received a sharp crack across the head from a heavy bamboo pole wielded by one of the Japs. As he sagged to his knees under the blow the Jap beat wildly at his prostrate body until he exhausted himself. When the other villagers stopped to watch, the Japs beat them until work was resumed.

"Bastards," whispered Donovan. "Did you notice the hate in the natives' eyes as they watched that little spectacle? If the Japs haven't got them too scared we can count on their help, but the question is how to get on the elephants. They must load up here but we can't get on with the Japs around. I've got an idea, though. Come on, let's get back to the others."

They clustered round to hear the result of the reconnaissance; Donovan told them, "Now fellers, here's my plan for Operation Jumbo. There's a crowd of villagers down there, stone-breaking; unfortunately there are also some Japs. To get to and from the quarry the elephants pass through a fairly dense patch of jungle. My idea is to wait until they have loaded and are on their way back, when we can jump them in that bit of jungle. So that they don't get scared and yell out I want Kachindit to approach them first to tell them that we're friends, so I'm leaving it to you, Evans, to get cracking with your sign language and brief Kachindit for his part. If they do give the show away then we'll have to run for the bridge and try to force our way across."

They were all hidden by the side of the track when the elephants came back for another load. The last one caught their scent and shied, but fortunately the mahout, suspecting nothing, forced the animal on just as they were about to burst from cover and run for the bridge.

"Psst! Corp," whispered Dave Rawnley, "that last chap is an Indian, so if Kachindit fails to make them understand I'll see what I can do."

They waited in hiding for what seemed an exceptionally long time and were beginning to wonder whether, after all, they had been seen and the Japs warned, when the first elephant reappeared, the heavy load swaying from side to side in time with the animal's gait.

Slowly the convoy drew nearer, each elephant gripping with its trunk the tail of the one in front. Trying to stop their breath from escaping, jumpy fingers on triggers, the hidden men looked up at the huge bulk of the elephants as they drew level.

"Ah, here's Kachindit," thought Donovan as the little hillman approached, his bowed legs striding purposefully along. Kachindit hailed the leading mahout and the animals were halted while they conversed, Kachindit pointing into the bushes round about. As the mahout slid to the ground Donovan stepped into view, his hand outstretched in greeting. On seeing him the mahouts jabbered excitedly, the one talking to Kachindit made to remount but the corporal ran forward, grabbing his arm. The native shrank from him, calling out to his two friends. Donovan released his grip and summoned the section to surround the elephants. Kachindit spoke urgently to the mahout, pointing to himself and Donovan, but the villager was still very uncertain.

"Rawnley, have a go at that wog back there. We don't seem to be getting anywhere with this chap."

"He says that the Japs will beat them if they are caught and they have families to consider," Rawnley reported. "Also it's impossible to hide us on top of these stones."

"Tell him that they will be well paid if they take us, and that we will hide under the stones," Donovan replied. "Get your money out, you others. It won't do you any good if we fail to cross that bridge."

Chalky kept his money at the bottom of one of his pouches. To get at it he had to remove all the other

contents, including a tin of "Blighty" cigarettes. The Indian mahout called down to him, pointing to the tin. Rawnley said that he was asking if he could have it.

"Can he hell have it, it's full of fags," replied Chalky indignantly. "Here, wait a minute, Dave, tell him he can have the fags an' all if he'll take us over."

As Rawnley passed the message on the Indian jumped down, coming forward with hands outstretched. Chalky handed the tin to him, laughing at the puzzled expression which came into his eyes when he removed the lid, for underneath the tin was sealed with tinfoil. Taking it back again he showed the Indian the tin opener in the lid and how to operate it. The other two villagers came over in answer to their friend's call, watching wide-eyed with wonder as Chalky replaced the lid and turned it to cut the tinfoil. They stood spellbound for a moment when he removed the lid again to show them the tightly packed cigarettes, then they made a grab for the tin, chattering like children.

"Oh, no, you don't," exclaimed Chalky, laughing, and thrust the tin behind his back.

"Hey, Don," he called to Evans, "and you, Dave, you've got a tin each. Hand 'em over quick."

In possession of all three tins he told Rawnley to explain to the Indian that if they agreed to take them across the river they could have a magic tin apiece.

While they went into a huddle over the matter, Chalky strolled over to Donovan. "It looks as though we've won them over, Corp, but if we have to make two journeys as you say, I guess we'd better keep the tins until the last trip is completed, don't you?"

Rawnley called out that they had agreed to take them over, and Donovan told him to explain to them that they would get some money for the first trip and the cigarettes when they had completed the second.

Having reached agreement the natives made the elephants kneel. First slinging a few stones into the bushes to make room, Donovan told Stormy and Rawnley to take the first elephant, Dingy and Culshaw the second, Chalky and Hopkinson the last.

Settling themselves as comfortably as possible in the paniers, Chalky took a cigarette from the tin he had opened and handed it to the grinning Indian.

Lurching to their feet the elephants lumbered on again, while Donovan and the remainder of the second party went back into hiding to wait impatiently for their turn. The jagged edges of the stones dug into their bodies with each roll of the panier, but in the excitement of the escape the knocks were felt but hardly noticed. It was a slow business, though; it seemed hours before they heard the Jap guard on the bridge calling to the elephant men. Chalky could hear the timbers creak as the first animal turned on to the bridge. There was one of the Japs calling out again and he seemed very annoyed about something. The mahouts shrilled at their beasts, the cavalcade coming to a halt.

"I'll get the Indian first if he gives the show away," vowed Chalky to himself, hugging the rocks while he tried to stifle his breathing. Suddenly a horrid thought entered his mind making him feel faint for a second or two. He glanced across at Hoppy who lay there with his mouth wide open against a rock, his hands shaking a little on his rifle grip. "Not much inspiration there," he thought, "but he's better than nothing if it comes to a showdown." Then he wanted to laugh as he thought how funny they must all look, their bodies taut with expectancy, stupid expressions on their faces, like Hoppy there, waiting for fate to decide whether they should go on fleeing like hunted beasts or go out fighting in a bloody orgy.

The sudden jolt of the elephant as it moved forward again, throwing him back against the sharp stones, caused the pent-up breath to hiss from his lips.

"*Tik hai, sahib,*" whispered the mahout as they stopped again. Peering over the side Chalky saw that they were safe once more in the friendly jungle. Stormy and the others were clambering down from their mounts.

"Beedies, sahib," asked the Indian, pointing to the cigarette tins.

Lowering himself slowly to the ground, Chalky called softly to Rawnley. "Here, Dave, explain to this wog that they must fetch the others over before they get the cigarettes, and ask him what the hold-up was for."

After having a few words with the Indian before the elephants moved off again to unload the stones, Rawnley settled himself down beside Chalky informing him that the Jap had been bullying the mahouts for being such a long time but the Indian had explained that he was suffering from dysentery.

Pointing at Chalky, Hoppy guffawed, "It's a wonder he didn't get dysentery. You should have seen his face, white as a sheet he was, him that's supposed to be scared of no Jap."

"You, you blockhead, you haven't enough sense to be scared," snapped Chalky. "It just happens that the wog was smoking an English cigarette while the Jap was questioning him."

"Ruddy hell!" gasped a shaker Hoppy.

"Get the fags out, Chalky," said Stormy some time later as the elephants reappeared.

When his friends had dismounted Chalky threw a tin of cigarettes to each of the mahouts. "I'll be wishing I had 'em back shortly," he said. "I'm almost out of cigs."

"That wouldn't worry you for long if you were still on the other side of that bridge," replied his pal Evans.

As they made off into the trees again Stormy told the corporal that the Japs were making a road from the bridge toward the railway. He surmised that the river must be unnavigable farther down, and they would have to ferry the goods from the river to the railway along the road.

"Something for us to remember, Stormy. 'The R.A.F. could make a lovely mess of their scheme,'" suggested Donovan.

The following morning, in blinding rain, they started on their perilous journey into the hill country. The rain had turned the soil into slime, literally moving underfoot as it was washed downhill. On the steep slopes it was impossible to obtain a good footing, and they kept falling and slithering down until they were brought roughly to a halt by some tree. The filthy, smelly slime covered their hands, faces and clothes as they climbed onwards in silence ; breath was too precious to waste on talk. Only a muttered curse came occasionally from Hoppy and a wisecrack or two from the irrepressible Cockney.

Culshaw was in the grip of dysentery. At frequent intervals Roberts would cackle, "There he goes. Go on, mate, ya winniñ'. Betcha he don't make it," as Culshaw dashed off, sliding his pants from under his belt as he ran. The disease weakened him considerably but they had no medical supplies to counteract it. At first Donovan made the others give him their spare tins of cheese to try to bring on constipation, but he was too ill to eat anything.

The rain continued, streams were transformed into raging torrents which tore at their banks sweeping soil and bushes along with them. Leeches and monsoon flies appeared as if by magic, the former a serious torment to the weary and hungry men. Leech hunting parades became a regular feature of each halt, as stripping off their clothing the cigarette smokers went round burning the blood-sucking insects out of their own and their comrades' flesh.

At night, too, the mosquitoes came out in swarms making sleep almost impossible with their infernal buzzing about one's ears, and the morning light revealed swollen faces as a result of the attacks. Having previously discarded their mosquito head nets and gloves, the best they could do to protect themselves was to roll in a blanket, placing their bush-hats over their faces. Roberts remarked that they must have some good blood in their veins because all the insects were after it.

They were now out of food except for a few odd biscuits and a tin or two of cheese which normally no one cared for, but now Donovan requisitioned them to ensure that everyone got a fair share. The map showed a few small and widely scattered villages settled on hilltops, so he decided to make for one which was, according to his reckoning, about two days' march away, reasoning that the place was so inaccessible that they would be safe from Jap interference. With food as the incentive he reckoned that, hills or no hills, they should make pretty good time, but by mid-day they encountered a most serious obstacle in the form of a deep, fast-flowing river where the map showed only a small stream.

Stormy and Dave Rawnley, the two strongest swimmers, attempted to take a rope across but the current was too strong for them, and they would soon have been in difficulties had not their comrades hauled them in to safety.

Fuming with impatience at the delay, the corporal sent a patrol along the bank in either direction, and after some time Johnny Aston came back to report that the river narrowed considerably farther up. He thought it possible to bridge the gap with bamboo which grew plentifully nearby.

Donovan wasted no time in further investigations but led his patrol to the spot, finding everything as Scrounger had said.

"Now, lads," he said, "we'll fell a thick bamboo over the chaung here, then we'll rig a rope handrail up so that anyone who slips off the bamboo can swing his way over, monkey fashion—that should come natural to most of you. Evans, tell Kachindit that I want him to go over first to take the rope over, less chance of him falling with his bare feet, but make sure he fastens it strongly because you're going over next to test it. Rawnley, you come over last and bring the rope with you. Don't any of you fall in there," he continued, pointing to the broiling waters which forced their way between the confined rocky banks, "or you're a gonner."

Having got the bamboo in position they watched anxiously as Kachindit ran agilely across, paying the rope out as he did so. A little cheer was sent up as he reached the far side safely and began fixing the rope to a nearby tree.

Evans was the next over, moving his feet slowly along the bamboo, at the same time keeping a tight grip on the rope handrail. As the bamboo bent considerably beneath the weight of the loaded men, Donovan sent them over separately. Everything was going splendidly when Chalky, who was the next in line, saw Tommy Culshaw falter and shake his head. "Hold on, Tom," he called, dashing forward just as Culshaw put his hand to his eyes, half turned and plunged into the water.

Something caught Chalky a stinging blow across the neck, sending him staggering to his knees almost on the brink of the rocky shelf which formed the bank, and with a splash Dave Rawnley landed in the water almost on top of the insensible form of Culshaw. Grabbing wildly with his free hand he managed to catch hold of a pack strap as they went under. The rope almost tore itself from his grasp as it twanged to its full extent, pulling he and his burden clear of the pounding water for a second and giving him a chance to draw some air into his lungs before they

were sucked under again. The others had stood spellbound for a moment at the swiftness of the event, but now those on the far bank rushed forward, hauling strongly at the rope. Each time they heaved some in, the raging torrent tore it back again, jerking them forward with its savage force.

Scrambling to his feet, Chalky grasped the situation in a flash, quickly swinging himself, hand over hand, along the bamboo. Stormy and Timber Woods, who were also on the near bank, immediately followed his initiative. The bamboo creaked and groaned as it bent dangerously beneath the weight of the three swinging figures, but they were over before it could break altogether. Adding their strength to the rope, they managed to draw the gyrating bodies close to the rocks.

As Donovan ran a couple of turns of rope round a rock, Evans was lowered over the edge by Hoppy and Dingy. Taking hold of Culshaw's belt he relieved the now exhausted Rawnley of his burden. When they had both been dragged on to dry land Lance-Corporal Bell set to applying artificial respiration to the water-logged Culshaw, soon being rewarded by the sight of the water pumping out of his mouth. Meanwhile Donovan, realising that it would be impossible to proceed farther that day, decided to bivouac where they were. Eating the last of the food, crouched round a tiny fire which Donovan had allowed them to light, Rawnley told them that he saw Culshaw falling and almost without thinking he had cut the rope and leapt into the river.

"Yes, and you very nearly had me in with you," said Chalky rubbing his neck where the rope had caught it.

"Could do with some more blankets for Culshaw, Corporal," announced Dingy Bell as he approached the group round the fire. "He's still delirious and is running a high fever. The best we can do is to try to sweat it out of him and hope that it's not too serious."

"Two of you hand over your blankets then, and double up with your pals for the night," instructed Donovan.

As Chalky and Roberts handed their blankets to Dingy the cockney cracked, "Don't put mine underneaf, cock. I don't trust dysentery."

Culshaw was still feverish next morning, but the food situation being as it was, Donovan felt he had no alternative but to push on if only for a little way.

The gradient of the hills combined with the mud were too much for the sick man who had to be supported all day by two of the others, slowing their progress considerably. When darkness fell, therefore, the corporal kept them on the move despite protests. Their eyes gradually accustomed themselves to the darkness to a certain degree, but even so, there were many falls, each accompanied by a curse, as they tripped over tree roots which crept across the track, apparently jumping up at them as they passed, or a creeper would entwine itself around wandering ankles, jerking them forward.

"Never fought I'd 'ave ter dance frew the ruddy jungle when I joined the army," cracked Roberts, picking each foot up gingerly to avoid the snares of the night.

Before the laugh his remark caused had died down there came a grunt from Hoppy who tripped over a root. As he fell, his mess-tin, which was fastened on the outside of his pack, swung forward to fetch him a resounding smack on the back of the head. They burst into laughter as he lashed out at the offending timber with his boot. "Damn roots," he growled. "Daft idea marchin' in t'dark anyway. What th'ell are you lot laughin' at? You don't laugh so much when you come a cropper."

"All right, Hoppy, we'll halt here. We can't have you going round making all that din with your mess-tin. You're not in the Boys' Brigade Band now, y'know," laughed Donovan.

Utterly worn out, they moved thankfully away from the track and, unrolling their groundsheets and blankets in double quick time, were soon fast asleep, Donovan having dispensed with a guard for once.

Before moving off next morning they grubbed in their packs for crumbs of food, tightening their belts to ward off the hunger pains which rumbled around their stomachs.

Late that same afternoon they were still plodding wearily, almost automatically, forward when Stormy, who was the forward scout, came running back shouting excitedly, "We're there boys! The village is just ahead. The village and food. Think of it, we can eat again."

Scrounger made as if to rush forward, shouting, "Come on lads, food," but the corporal grabbed his arm.

"Don't be any sillier than you can help. We're scouting that village just in case the Japs are there. You'll get your food in good time, but the way you're going about it, it will probably be lead."

There was a marked change in their bearing, however, as they went on again; sluggish footsteps were light, backs straighter and faces alight with eagerness as they thought of the feed awaiting them just ahead.

There was the village all right, a few bamboo huts in a small clearing at the top of the next hill, looking very peaceful in the sunlight. They hardly noticed the climb, even Culshaw pushing forward stronger than ever.

Near the top Donovan halted them, sending Stormy and Evans on to scout the village. Only their respect for his firm authority held the others in check.

"I'll bet those rotten devils are eating all the grub up," grumbled Scrounger, when they had been gone for some time. Donovan told him to shut his big mouth, but even he thought they should have been back by now.

On hearing Stormy hail them they leapt to their feet but lost some of their exuberance when they saw his face,

for it was a picture of despair as he said, "It's empty ! Deserted ! The village is just a ruin ; no one lived there for years. We've had it." He sank to the ground hopelessly. "We are finished, Bob," he told Donovan. "We just can't go on any farther in our state without food."

"In our state !" echoed the corporal. "What do you mean, in our state ? Why, you've never been fitter, any of you. You wanted some of that surplus fat off you, and the exercise we've had these last few days has just toughened us up nicely."

"Yus," chipped in Roberts, "an' wots the good of grub anyway ? You'd on'y eat it if yer got it. Look at 'Oppy 'ere, why he looks ten years younger, don't yer, Grandad," he said, slapping the crestfallen Hopkinson on the back.

The village was as bad as Stormy had described. White ants had been eating the timber at their leisure : the bamboo walls were almost transparent, crumbling at a touch. The palm-frond roofs let shafts of sunlight through to pierce the gloom, accentuating the decay.

"Wonder why they left ?" asked Scrounger as he poked in a corner with his bayonet.

"Probably 'disease," ventured Rawnley. "I've heard tell that when some epidemic or other hits a village those left alive hop it to build a new village elsewhere, leaving the old place to the evil spirits."

"Quite possible," put in Stormy, "but I think it's more likely that they moved to allow this land to stand fallow. These hill tribes, you know, have a crop rotation system of sorts. They till all the available land around a village for years until all the goodness has been taken out of the soil. They then move to another site they own and start afresh there. It will probably be a lifetime or more before they return here."

"Don't fink I'll wait then, mite," said Roberts. "I might miss me demob group."

So busy were they exploring the village that no one had noticed that Evans was missing, except Kachindit, who slipped quietly away to look for him, but they came running out of the huts, however, when they heard his shout. He came staggering toward them carrying a huge bunch of bananas. Kachindit trotted alongside, similarly laden.

"'Ere y'are lads. These'll help to keep your back from your front," he said, dumping his load in the grass covered street.

Needing no invitation, they scrambled for the fruit, barely giving themselves time to peel off the skin before stuffing it into their mouths wolfishly.

"Easy lads," warned Donovan between mouthfuls. "Chew 'em well or you'll get indigestion. Very bad for it, bananas are."

They took not the slightest notice of his remark; each one being determined to eat more than anyone else.

When eventually they lay back, their hunger satisfied for a time, the stalks were almost bare of fruit and discarded skins lay around in untidy profusion.

"Wonder how long it takes to starve to death?" someone asked.

"Dunno, mite, an' I ain't 'opin' ter find out," replied Roberts. "I suppose we're dead already, officially, seein' as 'ow we've bin missin' so long. Those chair-borne wallahs in Delhi will 'ave sent a telegram sayin', 'I regret to inform you that your lovin' son Jack Roberts is missin', believed killed, on active service in Burma.'" He exploded into a harsh cackle. "Blimey, I can jus' see me Ma's face when I turns up at last, 'Wot yer doin' 'ere?' she'll say. 'I fought you wus dead.' Yus, mites, that's wot we are, dead, a dead patrol." He laughed again.

"O.K., Robbo, you've had your joke, now help me collect a few of those ground nuts which Dave found. They'll give us something to chew on for breakfast," said

Evans. "Anyway, you know it's not true about them sending telegrams; they always make sure before they do that." He rolled his eyes meaningly towards Culshaw, who had propped himself up on one elbow and was staring with an expression akin to terror in his eyes.

Roberts followed his direction, and when he saw Culshaw, realised the damage he had caused. "Wot's it matter if it ain't true, cock, it caused a larf, didn't it? C'mon, let's go for them nuts before we all go nuts."

It was too late to march farther that day, so while some of them cleaned one of the less ruined huts the remainder searched the overgrown clearing in the hope of finding something edible. When darkness forbade further foraging, their total gain was a few wild groundnuts, small and under-ripe. Placing the hard white nuts on stones round the fire to dry out during the night, all but the guards settled down to sleep.

Chapter 6

THROUGHOUT the night they ran a shuttle service to and from the trees as the fruit they had eaten gripped their bowels. When morning came they all looked and felt very washed out, and in consequence were evil-tempered.

Tommy Culshaw had not eaten many of the bananas, but what few he had consumed had re-awakened his dysenteric condition to violent action. His bowels had ceased to function altogether and he lay uncaring, only partially conscious of his surroundings, on a filthy blanket, which he had fouled time after time throughout the night.

Short-tempered as they were, most of the section cursed him for what they termed his filthy habits, but Dingy Bell rounded on them in an astonishing flash of temper, stifling

them into a sullen silence. Culshaw, he informed them, was extremely ill and physically incapable of walking to and from the latrine.

"I guess he's got to do some walking, though," replied Donovan, "because we're moving out of here right now."

"I'm sorry, Corporal, but he can't be moved for a day or so," Dingy said quietly.

"Well, he stays behind in that case. Come on, you others, get to your feet and get your kit on. This isn't a ruddy holiday camp," Donovan growled bad-temperedly.

As he turned away, Dingy moved forward and grabbing his arm he swung him round. "You're not moving from here for a day or so at least," he hissed. "Run! Run! That's all you think about, running away to save your own skin. Well, this time you can stay, and if the Japs come you must fight them—or are you yellow?"

A stinging blow to the mouth sent him sprawling in the red dust, a thin stream of blood spurting from his broken lips.

"Yeller," Donovan stormed at them. "Yeller! No one calls me that and gets away with it. You dim-witted lot of fools, you'd starve to death if it wasn't for me. D'you think food is going to drop from the sky right into your namby-pamby laps? I said we're moving, so WE'RE MOVING." He roared the last two words at them, and they scrambled to their feet with alacrity, frightened by this unknown corporal of theirs.

The shouting had shocked Culshaw out of his daze, automatically he struggled to gain his feet like the others.

"Corporal Gale," bawled Donovan, "you and Woods help him along. The remainder of us will push on. When we find food I'll come back for you."

"But," began Stormy, then stopped as he saw that Donovan had already set off, yanking a dejected Dingy to his feet, as he passed.

They were dropping downhill into a valley, the rocky

ground forming a series of steps, in places very steep so that they had to jump or, on occasions, climb down! The rocks were hot to the skin under a burning sun which had already dried the mud into a fine dust that swirled into the air as they disturbed it.

A small tribe of Gibbon apes, attracted by the noise, swung from tree to tree, keeping pace with the section, chattering interminably.

"Wish I was a ruddy monkey," whispered Roberts to Dave Rawnley as they clambered amongst the rocks. "Me poor old dawgs are killin' me."

Halting for a short rest, sinking down wearily in the shade, the apes clustered in a nearby tree, eyeing them inquisitively.

The men watched them for some minutes, laughing over the antics of one mischievous youngster who was teasing his mother, having tired of the strange creatures who walked on the ground below.

"Inquisitive devils, aren't they," said Evans. "I once heard of some being caught by placing a coconut on the ground with some rice in it. A small hole allowed them to put their hand in but wasn't large enough for them to get their clenched fist out, and they hadn't the sense to let go of the rice they had grabbed."

"Yes, they're crackers really. Most animals buzz off as soon as they hear a man approaching, but monkeys must come to see what's going on. I could shoot one of those as easy as falling off a rock if I wanted to," replied Chalky.

They were silent for a while until suddenly Scrpunger Aston brought his rifle up, sighted it on one of the apes and pulled the trigger. The apes scattered with the report. All but one which fell shrieking from its perch and crashed to the ground where it lay still.

"What the hell did you do that for, you idiot?" shouted Donovan.

"Just to prove you wrong, Corporal," sneered Scrounger. "You see, food does drop from the sky into my namby-pamby lap."

"Food! Good fer you, Scrarnger," shouted Roberts. "Why didn't we fink of it before?"

As they gathered round looking helplessly at the dead ape Scrounger said, "Well, what are you waiting for? C'mon, let's get cracking with a stew."

By the time the meal was ready Culshaw and his escort had caught up. Food, however, still had no appeal for him, but the corporal forced him to have a little of the gravy. As they ate their spirits lifted considerably, bad tempers fading away.

"Better than Firpo's in Calcutta," announced Evans as he munched on a leg of meat.

"Tastes just like chicken too," put in Donovan, "only it's a little bit tougher. How's the jaw working, Dingy?" he called across.

"Oh it's still good enough to cat with," came the reply.

"Sorry I slugged you back there. Shouldn't lose my temper like that."

"I guess it was my own fault really," replied Dingy. "It was the medical man in me. You know, must protect the sick."

"Aw, kiss each other an' 'ave done, an' then we can all get on with our eating," called out Scrounger good-humouredly.

Now that they had some food inside their stomachs Donovan kept them moving fast, leaving Chalky and Hopkinson behind to bring Culshaw along.

The corporal and his party reached the bottom of the hill to find themselves in a deep rocky gorge. There was no sign of a break in the precipitous walls, so after some hesitation he led them upstream, deeper into the hills. Out of the forbidding gorge at last they followed a faint

trail which ran more or less parallel to the river. The vegetation on either side of the narrow track was small but almost impenetrable scrub interspersed with patches of coarse spiky grass, a most unfavourable spot for a bivouac.

The day was fast fading when Kachindit, who had gone on ahead, came hurrying back chattering excitedly to Evans and pointing up the track.

"What's he on about, Evans?" asked Donovan.

"Dunno, Corp, but by his actions he seems to want us to hurry. We can't do worse than stay here, so I suggest we follow him to see what he's found."

Kachindit hurried them along, running ahead near the top of the hill as only a hillman can.

When they caught up with him he was squatting by the side of the track looking down into a small hollow where a long bamboo hut jutted out from the rocky wall, its rear end actually being built into the rock while the front was supported by bamboo piles twelve or fifteen feet high.

A woman was busy husking rice underneath the building, the rhythmic thud sounding clearly in the air as she jumped on and off the see-saw-like pestle.

They had to cross an open space before reaching the hut so Donovan sent Kachindit on alone to avoid frightening the occupants. When she saw him approaching the woman called out and an old man, very thin and grey-haired, climbed agilely down the ladder which led into the hut. He waited until Kachindit had called out the formal greeting before speaking and appeared most agitated as he listened to Kachindit's tale, for he kept glancing anxiously toward the bushes where the section lay hidden.

Darkness had fallen with tropical swiftness before Kachindit returned to lead them to the hut where the old man met them at the foot of the rickety stairway, jabbering excitedly and wringing his hands. He was obviously very frightened and did not relish their company, but Donovan

wanted shelter and food for his men too much to worry about him, although he would have liked to have known the reason for such a demonstration.

Once up the creaking bamboo steps they found themselves in a long room barely high enough to allow them to stand upright in the centre. The thatching sloped steeply away to either side where there was only about a foot clearance between floor and roof. A fire glowed drearily on a stone hearth in the centre of the floor. By its faint light they could just discern a dark opening at the far end where a doorway gave access to another room.

- A boy of about twelve crouched by the fire, but of the woman there was no sign. Voices coming from behind the partition indicated that the women's quarters lay there.

The old man quickly followed them, drawing the ladder up after him and lowering a trapdoor into place.

As their eyes became accustomed to the gloom the soldiers saw spears, bows and arrows and other indiscernible objects fastened to the rafters. There was no furniture at all.

Kachindit left the old man to speak to Evans in a mixture of his native tongue and his newly acquired English.

"Take it easy, take it easy," Evans butted in on the flow of words. "You're too excited, Kachindit. I can't tell a darned word you are saying. Now start again, slowly."

"Corp," Evans addressed Donovan when Kachindit had finished. "I can't make very much out, but it appears there are some Japs around and the old chap is frightened in case they find out we've been here and take reprisals against him and his family."

"Where are the Japs? Try and find out from Kachindit how far away they are and whether they are likely to pay us a visit to-night," replied the corporal.

The rest gathered round as Evans again spoke to Kachindit.

"He doesn't seem to know just where they are, but he doesn't think they'll interfere with us to-night."

"Well, we can't go on, anyway. We're more likely to bump into them if we start wandering around in the dark than if we stay here. At least we have been warned and can put up a fight if any of the devils do show up. Tell Kachindit that we want some food right away. I'm starving."

When the patriarch left the room to give instructions for the meal, the young lad, who had neither moved nor spoken previously, got up from the fire and said, "Do not take too much notice of my uncle, soldiers, he is very frightened because he is so old."

For a second or two they gaped at him in astonishment until Roberts broke the silence. "Blimcy, he speaks English better than we do. Where did you learn it, chico?"

"My father worked for the Government in Taungni and I went to school there. When the Japanese came my father joined a guerrilla band, sending my mother, sister and myself to live with my uncle here."

"Never mind that just now. What about the Japs?" asked Donovan.

"Some Japanese soldiers are in the district hunting for the guerrillas. They burned down a small village near here only yesterday because they said the villagers has been supplying them with food," continued the boy.

"How many Japs are there?" enquired Donovan.

"I do not know, because when my uncle heard they were coming he took us all into the jungle to hide. I do not think there are very many from what I overheard when one of the men from the village came to see my uncle."

Before they could get any more out of him the lad heard his uncle returning and darted back to his place by the fire.

After eating the very appetizing meal of fish and rice

which had been prepared, the corporal detailed guards, informing the others that they had better get as much sleep as possible. He did not intend being caught unawares if the Japs did put in an appearance. He himself slept on top of the trapdoor in case the old man attempted to tell the enemy of their presence, thus vindicating himself.

He need not have feared, however, for when morning came the patriarch was in the best of spirits. The fact that he had taken an active part against the Japanese by sheltering some British soldiers seemed to have awakened in him the fighting spirit of his race. He not only replenished their food supply as far as his limited stocks would allow, but he also offered to guide them to another village where he had friends.

Donovan told him through his nephew who, no doubt as a result of the old man's changed attitude, was now allowed to take part in the proceedings, that he would have to await the arrival of some friends, one of whom was very sick.

The patriarch demanded to know where these friends were and why had he not been told before? He would then have sent his nephew and niece to look for them.

Having made his mind up to such a course he called out in a shrill voice and a young woman, the boy's sister, appeared from the other side of the partition, her head downcast in shyness, and waited before her uncle.

Roberts let out a low whistle. "Um ! Um ! I wonder if there are any more back there like this. She sure is lovely."

"Shut up, you fool," Donovan said, nudging him. "Don't queer our pitch by woman-trouble."

Even in the dim light of the hut, however, they could see that she was very shapely and pleasant to look upon.

After the boy and girl had gone to look for Culshaw and his escort, the old man went into a far corner of the

room, taking down from the roof timbers an old shotgun which he stroked lovingly, then commenced rubbing it with a piece of cloth.

While he was thus engaged, Donovan tried to get some information out of him about the country ahead and the whereabouts of the Japs, but owing to the language difficulty didn't get very far. Suddenly firing broke out close at hand. Quickly they scrambled for their guns and the rickety ladder. Fortunately they had already packed their kit and in a few seconds were out of the hut, dashing for cover.

"It's Chalky and the others," shouted Evans as a fresh burst of firing came from the direction they had come from the previous evening.

"Maybe it's the Kachin girl," gasped Roberts.

"We'll soon find out," called Donovan as he led them racing along the track.

They hadn't gone very far when they met the girl running toward them. Stopping only long enough to gesticulate wildly to her rear, she hurried past them making for the hut.

They ran forward again until bullets began cutting through the air round about, sending them scattering into the tough spiky grass which bordered this section of the track.

Squirming along, ignoring in the excitement the cuts and scratches caused by the grass, they came upon Culshaw at the side of the track while Chalky and Hoppy with the Kachin boy crouched just in front.

"Hold it," called Donovan as they halted. He crept forward until he was just behind Chalky. "Chalky. How many and where?" he asked softly.

Chalky's head whipped round at the sound of his voice. "Hi, Corp! You've come just in time because we're out of ammunition. Keeping them away by will power." He

ducked his head as bullets thudded into the trees and went on, "There's about six of 'em, but they've got an automatic of some kind. We could hold them up all day if we had some ammo."

"Have you been retreating?"

"From time to time. Why?" asked Chalky.

"Well give me a couple of minutes and then retire. I'll see to Culshaw. Let them see you but don't stop when you see us," replied Donovan.

"I get it, Corp," grinned Chalky as Donovan crawled away again.

Donovan and his party were in position when the Kachin boy ran past followed by Hoppy who gaped when he saw them and would have stopped, in spite of Chalky's instructions, had not Donovan waved him on angrily.

Then with a fierce yell Chalky jumped up and ran, weaving from side to side of the track.

The Japs sent a wild fusillade of shots after him and, uttering jubilant Banzai yells, leapt to their feet chasing after him—right into the net Donovan had cast.

The carefully timed volley stopped the Japs in their tracks, two of them for good, and before they could recover from their surprise the Britishers were upon them.

Scrounger sank his bayonet into a Jap with such force that he pinned him to a tree. As he struggled to free it another Jap leapt at him screaming, but the scream suddenly changed to a gurgle as Stormy shot him. He continued to move forward, his mouth working horribly as the nerves slackened in death. Freeing his bayonet at last, Scrounger smashed him in the face with his rifle butt and he crumpled to the ground.

Dave Rawnley killed a third Jap with a short burst from his Bren, and as the last one turned to flee down the track Kachindit flung his spear after him. The blade sank into his back, the Jap flinging up his arms and praying

round. Before anyone could stop him, Kachindit had run forward, grabbed the hair and with a fierce tribal cry lopped off his head with his razor-sharp dah.

Evans ran to him and, knocking the gruesome relic from Kachindit's hands, he pushed him away. Pulling the spear from the decapitated body he handed it over. "That was a good throw, Kachindit, but what do you think this is for?" he asked, tapping the rifle that was slung over the Kachin's shoulder.

"Get the food out of their packs, their arms and ammunition and we'll get moving as quickly as possible," called Donovan. Going over to where Scrounger knelt beside an open Japanese pack he said, "That was nice work, Aston. Feel any better for it?"

"I'd feel better if I were back in India," replied Scrounger without looking up.

Just as they were about to move on the old native came puffing along the track clutching his shot-gun.

"Yer too late, cock," laughed Roberts, "We've gorn and killed 'em orl."

The old man looked round at the fallen enemy and seemed rather glad that it was all over, in spite of his initial eagerness to be in the fight. As they set off toward the hut once more he followed slowly, leaning on his nephew.

Crossing the clearing, talking and off guard for once, they were halfway to the hut when the first shot rang out. Timber Woods slewed round and doubled up.

"Make for the trees," yelled Donovan, running forward to Timber. As he struggled to heave the wounded man across his shoulders Dave Rawnley ran across his front, firing the Bren gun from his hip, spraying bullets into the trees in front. His action made the enemy keep their heads down long enough for them to race into cover.

Stormy had quickly brought the others into action, and as all were exchanging fire with the enemy when Roberts

suddenly jumped to his feet. "Get back," he screamed. "Stay in the hut."

Taking no notice of his cries the Kachin girl scrambled down the bamboo ladder and ran across the clearing toward them, closely followed by the old woman. Roberts made as if to run to their aid, but Evans, who lay behind a nearby tree, grabbed his ankle, bringing him down. "It's no good, Robbo, you'll only get yourself killed," he said, fighting to hold him down.

The girl had almost reached the trees when the Jap machine-gun opened fire. Glancing involuntarily over her shoulder she cried out as she saw her aunt spin round with the force of the bullets which tore into her, collapsing in a misshapen heap in the dust.

"This way! Don't go back," yelled Roberts, squirming in Evans's grip, but the words were hardly out of his mouth before another long burst from the hidden gun halted the running girl, flinging her to the ground a yard or two from the old woman.

Roberts buried his face in the fallen leaves and did not see the figure of the old man rush past, at an incredible speed for one so old, to hurl himself at the Jap gun crew. The ancient shot-gun exploded with a loud bang, then pandemonium broke loose as he crashed into the bushes where the Japs lay hidden.

"Quickly, lads," called Donovan, "there's no hope for him, but he's given us our chance. Down this track."

The Japs were so intent on killing the old native that they failed to notice the others slipping away, but just as he reached the track Roberts stopped, turning to have a last look at the dead girl. They spotted him and, firing a few rounds wildly in his direction, started in pursuit, screaming exultantly.

Hearing the screams, Stormy turned to see Roberts standing in the open, his captured automatic spraying

bullets at the enemy. Running back, he grasped his arm. "Don't be a damned fool, Roberts, you can't do anything for the girl now. We would probably have got clear if you hadn't stood there trying to get yourself killed," he panted as they pounded along the track after the others.

"Sorry, Corp. I just saw red. You should've lef' me an' made yer own getaway."

Roberts' wild fusillade had caused the Japs to dive for cover and given the British a slight advantage, but they could hear their pursuers not far behind and gaining.

Stormy and Roberts soon caught up with their friends, for Culshaw was holding them back. As they ran, Donovan called out, "We can't outrun them, lads, so ~~there's~~ only one chance. Drop out one by one to the right of the track, Culshaw first. When they've passed, make your way back to the beginning of this track. Rawnley and Evans will continue for some distance to give them some tracks to follow, but as soon as you get the opportunity to break off do so and join the rest of us."

Culshaw ran stumblingly on, unheeding the corporal's words until Donovan roughly pushed him off the track, gasping to Stormy to fall out and look after him.

Donovan was scrambling up the far side of a dried-up stream when the Japs rounded a bend almost at his heels. Wrenching a grenade from his belt he flung it at them as they bunched together in the nullah. As it left his hand he jumped sideways, the force of his jump and the weight of his body sending him crashing through the bushes like a bayonet through a straw-filled dummy. Using his momentum, he rolled away from the track as the grenade exploded with an ear-splitting crack, pieces of shrapnel whistling through the trees above his head.

Before the sound of the explosion had died away he was on his feet, running crouching back toward the head of the track, crossing the chaung out of sight of the trouble caused

by his grenade. He found Stormy anxiously awaiting him, together with Culshaw, Hoppy, Chalky and Dingy. The others continued to arrive at short intervals until only Rawnley was missing, when Kachindit, whom Stormy had placed watching the track, reported Japs approaching.

Donovan quietly, but fluently, cursed Rawnley for holding them up so long as he positioned his men to meet this new threat.

The Japs made a very slow and careless approach and Donovan jumped to the conclusion that they were having difficulty forcing along a truculent Rawnley. He was issuing instructions for a surprise attack to secure his release when into view staggered two terribly wounded Japs

"Must be that grenade of mine," he thought as he gazed at the horribly mutilated pair without remorse. "Can't do us any harm themselves, but they'd better be got rid of just in case they give the alarm."

One of the wounded men groaned slightly and folded up in a senseless heap. His companion gazed stupidly at him for a moment before lowering himself slowly to the ground where he leaned against a tree, eyes closed, his hands gripping his rifle across his knees.

Scrounger crawled over to Donovan's side in response to his signal. "Which one do you fancy?" whispered the corporal, smiling to himself as he watched Scrounger's face as the latter dispassionately surveyed the scene. "Might be buying himself a pair of shoes," he thought.

"I'll take yon mon against the tree," announced Scrounger quietly, drawing his knife.

"O.K., but don't forget he isn't dead yet and he'll fight like a tiger if you give him a chance. I don't want a sound if we can possibly avoid it. I'll wait until you're on him before giving the other one his ticket."

"Rawnley must 'ave 'ad it, Stormy," said Hoppy as they

waited for Donovan and Scrounger. "I think we'd best get out of 'ere when the Corp gets back."

Stormy glanced at his watch before replying. "It's only just seven minutes since Donovan arrived so there's time yet. Here's Donovan now."

"Like hittin' coconuts," laughed Scrounger. "Niver knew what hit 'em."

"Rawnley not in yet?" Donovan asked. "Must be having a nap somewhere."

"Hey, Bob, I haven't seen Timber yet either," said Dingy.

"Timber had his chips back in the clearing. He was dead when I laid him down. He went out quick, anyway. C'mon, we've been waiting for you," he cried as Rawnley ran up to them. "Where've you been?"

"Well, I ran on for some distance after you others had dropped out, thinking to draw them on," panted Rawnley. "After I thought I'd gone far enough and couldn't hear anyone on my tail I went to ground for a slight breather before making my way back."

"And went ter kip like wot yer said, Corp," Roberts blurted out.

"Don't be funny, Robbo," went on Rawnley. "As I said, I left the track ready to beat it back here when a fresh party of Japs came along from the opposite direction. I thought they would see my tracks but they seemed to be in too much of a hurry."

"Where did they go?" asked Donovan anxiously.

"I'm coming to that, Corporal."

"Well, while he's coming you others stop hanging around with your mouths open and get your packs, because we're going. Now go on, where did they go?"

"When I caught them up they were in the nullah back there having a dekko at some dead and wounded Japs. I left them to it and got here as quickly as I could to give you the griff."

Donovan glanced round. "By the time you've taken to tell me," he said sarcastically, "I just wanted to make sure they hadn't joined us and were listening."

Swinging his pack on to his shoulders he signalled them to follow him. "I'll go first with Kachindit. We'll be moving fast, so it's up to you others to see that Culshaw doesn't lag behind. Where's the native boy? Any of you seen him?"

"Scooted as soon as the trouble started," replied Chalky.

"Aw well, press on regardless."

Chapter 7

THEY camped for the night early, on the steep slope of a hill. Before them stretched an unbroken bush-cloaked flatland.

Donovan lit his cigarette and slowly applied the match to the map on his knees.

Scrounger jumped forward to stop him. "What the 'ell are y'doin'?" he demanded. "It's bad enough finding our way with a map—without it we're sunk."

The corporal flung the flaming paper from him. "That's not much good from now on. All that's left the way we're going is white and marked 'unsurveyed.'"

"But supposing we head back this way?" protested the still unconvinced Scrounger.

"We won't be. If we don't get out that way we don't get out at all. The Japs are on to us. You've seen for yourselves how they've closed in on us. If we don't get out of here soon they've got us in a noose."

"Well, if they're so clever why will they let us out that way?" asked Hoppy, pointing to the valley.

"If it's unsurveyed there won't be any roads or towns or railways, will there?" asked Donovan patiently and, without waiting for a reply, continued. "In that case it won't be any use to the yellow-bellies. They may follow us, but even they haven't got the men to spare to go chasing us forever, so I reckon if we can get a decent start we may yet outrun them. Don't any of you fall asleep on guard to-night because the Japs seem to be pretty thick 'round here, and we don't want to be caught napping at this stage. Those of you not on guard get as much sleep as you can—you'll probably have to sleep on your feet from now on. Don't unpack any of your kit, that includes bedding, in case we have to move quick. Stormy, you stay behind, I want a word with you."

When the others had settled themselves down Stormy said quietly, "Do you realise what lies down there, Corp?" indicating the lowland, already heavily shaded by the approaching night.

"That's why I asked you to stay behind. Thought you might have experience of swamps."

"Why should I?"

"Dunno, just a hunch I had. You seem to have been around quite a bit, and I thought you must have come across such country."

"O.K., Donovan, you're right. From what little I saw of it we should get through. Judging by the timber it can't all be swamp, and if we stick to the drier patches, plus a bit of luck, it may take us four or five days to push through. It won't be very nice though, anything but, and we are all in pretty bad shape to attempt it."

"I realise that," admitted the corporal. "I reckon we should have about two days' food between us and that's my main worry. Culshaw's the other. If he'd only pull himself together he may stand a chance but he seems to have given up fighting. I'm expecting trouble from some

of the others as well—that muck's enough to make anyone barbery, so I'm asking you now to stick by me ; we may do it between us. I may make some decisions you won't like. If so, tell me you views privately and I'll listen, but for God's sake don't let the others know I'm wrong."

After a moment's silence Stormy said, "There aren't many men who would have admitted they may be wrong, Bob, and I admire you for it. I'll do what you say, but I don't think I'll be finding fault with your decisions. If you can't pull us through then I certainly can't."

They moved at dawn and were on to the plain by the time the sun was casting its arrows at the earth. The hills rolled waves of blistering heat down into the valley where the eleven men toiled breathlessly. Heat haze danced maddeningly before their eyes ; eyes which smarted painfully with the salty tang of perspiration that ran down their faces. Their clothes were sodden, so that their shirt pockets stood out in light relief against the dark, wet background.

"Phew ! It's ruddy hot, mate," said Evans, breaking a long silence. "There's one good thing, though, Robbo, there'll be no hills to climb for a while."

"Ugh !" muttered Robbo.

"Ugh to you as well. What's wrong with you, Robbo, you've been like a bear with a sore head ever since yesterday ?"

"He's still heart-broken about his girl friend," volunteered Chalky when Roberts did not reply.

"Shut your big mouth and mind your own business," snarled Roberts, lunging at him.

"Well for Pete's sake can't you take a joke ?" asked Chalky in a most injured tone. "You couldn't have been serious about her, surely."

"It just 'appens that I loved her, but you blokes wouldn't understand a fmg like true love."

"Oh flipping hell," giggled Chalky as he sidled coyly

up to Evans who stroked his face and murmured, "You gorgeous beast, you," just as Roberts flew at them in a tearing rage, sending them both sprawling.

"Stop taking the micky or I'll kill you," he shouted as Donovan hurried back, attracted by the commotion.

"Are you blokes not hot enough without larking about like this?" he asked with a grin. "Now what's the trouble, Roberts?"

"He's going sun-happy, Corp," put in Chalky. "We were only having a joke with him and he went up in the air."

"I don't like your idea of a joke, mite," said Roberts, proceeding to outline his trouble to the corporal.

When he had said his piece Donovan said, "You'll get over it, Robbo. It's just that you've had too much male company lately and she appealed to your eyes."

"That's right. You weren't really in love with her, it's just that you wanted a woman," said Evans.

"Blimey, I didn't think any of us had that much energy left!"

Even Roberts had to laugh at Chalky's remark.

"Anyway, you have always told us your girl friend back home was the only one for you. What's her name again?"

"Beryl."

"That's it. Bermondsey Beryl. Looked well if you had eloped with the Kachin girl, then gone home and married your Beryl and I'd come to visit you and opened my big mouth."

"Ya don't fink I'd let any of you blokes visit me in Civvy Street, d'you?" asked Robbo, his good humour somewhat restored. "Wouldn't flipping trust ya."

They had been following a game trail, and late in the afternoon it led them to a swift-running stream. Beyond lay a jumbled tangle of vegetation. While the others were filling their water bottles and chaguls, Donovan went for a scout round.

"We're taking to the water again, lads," he said on his return. "Some of your feet are beginning to smell so I've decided to wash 'em for you."

The stream soon split up into numerous narrow channels and Donovan chose one haphazardly, having regard only to his general direction of march.

Gradually they fought their way deeper into the unknown, and just as gradually the firm ground surrendered to the water which seeped inexorably over the land.

They kept to the ever-narrowing thread of water which twisted tortuously between the matted undergrowth. To step falsely to either side meant sinking knee deep into stinking mud which sucked greedily to hold the intruding limbs. Donovan halted frequently to allow them the opportunity of removing their boots and socks to wash them, knowing only too well the dangers of foot-rot should the grit which crept between their socks and feet be given chance to grind away the skin. The heavy going and the forbidding jungle affected the sick Culshaw considerably. Never very talkative, he now withdrew into a shell of gloomy silence. Their surroundings visibly frightened him. His eyes, bright with fever, flashed wildly in their sunken sockets, seeking non-existent perils in the green wall which seemed to be closing in on them.

To conserve the remaining food, including a few rusty tins which the old Kachin had dug up from a hidden hoard, Donovan decided to cut out the mid-day meal, and as no suitable dry land presented itself he pushed on without halting, determined to make as much progress as possible before their strength went.

Early in the afternoon when the section was well strung out, Chalky White suddenly missed his pal, Tommy Culshaw. Hoppy and Dingy, who were just in front, had not seen him, nor had they any idea who should be helping him along. None of them could remember having seen

him since the last halt, but Hoppy said he couldn't be in front because he himself had started out as forward scout, and although he had gradually dropped back he was sure Culshaw had not passed him.

"He must have been left behind at the last stop," decided Chalky. "I'm going back to have a look."

"Don't be balmy," replied Hoppy, "you'll only get yourself lost in this muck, an' he's had it anyway."

"You're a ruddy Jonah, you are," Chalky declared, and, turning to Dingy, "Cut the trees on your right side at ten feet intervals so that I'll be able to follow you. Let the corporal know what's happened when you catch him up" he asked.

With Hoppy's forecast as to his probable fate still ringing in his ears, Chalky hung his pack from a branch and, carrying only his rifle, machete and a length of parachute rope, splashed his way back along the stream, marking the trees as he went.

Half an hour later, going very carefully now, scanning every tree for signs of their last halt, he was considering turning back, for allowing for his extra speed minus his pack, he calculated that he should have come across his friend before this, when his foot caught some obstruction under water, sending him sprawling.

Flinging his hands out instinctively to break his fall, he let go of his rifle. Picking himself up he plunged his arm into the water to fish for it.

When this method did not bring success he moved slowly backwards and forwards gingerly feeling for it with his feet. He was soon rewarded when his foot grated on something hard, and bending down he pulled a rifle out of the muddy bottom. His relieved grin gave way to a worried frown, however, for the rifle was not his but a small carbine similar to that which Culshaw had been carrying.

It wasn't long before he recovered his own rifle ; immediately starting to hunt for his friend. Hanging the carbine from a tree over the spot where he had found it he went farther along the stream for a considerable distance, but seeing no sign of Culshaw, returned to the carbine. Tying one end of the parachute cord to a tree, the other end round his middle, he started into the mud to one side of the stream. His flesh goose-pimpled and he shivered in horror as he sank deeper into the slime, feeling it pulling at him. Lunging forward, he wrenched his leg free only to plunge it again into the clutching ooze. Beads of cold sweat sprinkled his face as he threw himself forward faster and faster in a frenzy of fear. The rope in his hands had almost run out. Not daring to stop he turned, pulling on the rope, half jumping, half dragging himself back to the stream where he sat down in the water, shuddering at the experience. He longed for a smoke but his cigarettes had got soaked in his fall. For a minute or two he sat there, but got to his feet again as a water-snake glided from the bank a few feet away.

He began to think of Culshaw again ; not knowing just what to do about him he shouted his name time and time again until he was hoarse.

Fighting down the repulsion which made him want to run away, he tied his rope to another tree and took to the mud on the other side of the stream with no better luck.

After recovering his breath again he stripped off to remove the leeches from his body. As he did so he finally admitted to himself that it was hopeless to look any further for Culshaw ; one man could go on looking for ages and still not find him.

Having at last decided to return to the others he suddenly realised how very lonely he felt. For a moment panic reached up at him. Dressing quickly he hurried along, his eyes hunting for the cuts he had made on his way here,

fearful lest he missed his way. Automatically he counted his paces ; the cuts occurred at every tenth pace. His mind was wandering on to other thoughts before he had gone very far but something jerked it back again to those marks. Surely he had seen two cuts close together. Swinging round he went back a few feet, dreading the fact that he may be following the wrong marks, but sighed with relief when he saw that it wasn't a proper cut his mind had registered, just a piece of bark scraped off the bush.

He was about to push on again when he noticed mud stains on the trunk just above where the bark had been scratched. Pushing aside the leaves he glanced quickly round and saw more mud stains on two other trees. A man might be able to pull himself along from tree to tree, he argued, a man who had already fallen in the mud—a sick man !

Leaving his rifle and the carbine he climbed a tree in the hope he may see his friend. The foliage restricted his vision to a few feet but he could still see the trees with the mud stains so, clambering along the branches from tree to tree, he made his way in their direction. There was no sign of Culshaw but he could see the same marks on other trees now. Feeling sure that he was on the right track at last he swung along faster, disregarding the scratches and the bites of the red ants which he had disturbed.

Then he saw him ! His pack had caught in some branches and was holding him up, his face a few inches from the waiting mud. There was no movement and he looked dead already, one hand buried in the mud at the end of a listless arm.

Chalky lowered himself down beside the inert figure, bubbles squelching round his legs as he sank to his knees in the slime. He touched the pale face which was still warm. Thrusting his clammy hand inside Culshaw's shirt he felt the faint heartbeats and, lifting the head up by the hair, he

began slapping gently at first then, in desperation, with sharp stinging blows.

There was a retching noise and Culshaw vomited. His face screwed up at the taste and slowly he opened his eyes. He did not appear to see Chalky, but faintly the latter heard his whispered, "I saw her . . . waiting . . . for me." He began to cry softly.

"It's a darn funny place to wait," muttered Chalky. "Anyway, mate, we've got to get you out of here somehow."

Running a loop round Culshaw's chest he threw the rope over an overhanging bough and, hoisting him upright, tied him to the tree. The sick man had fainted again so, slinging the discarded pack on to his own shoulders, Chalky took to the trees once more. "Tarzan himself couldn't have done better," he thought, dropping into the stream.

Filling Tommy's water bottle he fished in the pack until he found the chlorinating tablets, popped one in, and leaving the pack with the guns, returned to his friend. Forcing some of the water between his lips he then sprinkled some over his feverish brow. The lukewarm liquid trickling down his throat brought Culshaw back to his senses. Shaking his head slowly from side to side he started to struggle weakly at his bonds.

"It's O.K., Tommy," murmured Chalky. "You're all right now."

Recognition flickered in the over-bright eyes at the sound of his voice. "Where . . . am I?" he asked slowly.

"You're in a ruddy mess, mate. Bet you thought you'd gone down below and I don't blame you, only I should not imagine it could be this bad down there," Chalky grinned. "Feel any stronger now, pal, because it's time we were moving?"

Culshaw nodded in reply, but as Chalky untied the rope he slithered helplessly to the ground.

"Whoops-a-daisy, me old china. Come on now, put your arm round my shoulder."

Together they floundered in the mire, Culshaw unable to help himself and his weight proving too much for Chalky. Eventually he managed to drag his friend to the next tree.

"Hang on there, Tommy, for a minute or two," he said, tying the rope round Culshaw's chest. "I'll run this round yonder tree and see if I can pull you along that way."

Struggling back again he told Culshaw to move as fast as he could and not to stop under any circumstances until he reached the tree. As Culshaw started off he put all his weight on the rope, using the tree as a pulley. The strain on the rope jerked him forward for a step or so then, for some unknown reason, he turned at right angles and as Chalky continued to heave, was dragged off balance.

"Come on, get up quickly," yelled Chalky feeling himself being dragged forward by Culshaw's dead weight. "For Christ's sake, man, do something, don't just lay there."

"It's no good . . . I'm finished. Why didn't you . . . leave me alone . . . to die?"

"Die! I'll kill you myself if you don't get up and move, you yellow devil. What you want is guts. 'Course you're sick, but that doesn't mean you've got to lie down to die. Get up before I come and kick your face in."

Culshaw made a feeble attempt to rise while Chalky tugged harder on the rope, but soon gave up and lay back again. Chalky flung the rope from him in disgust. When he tried to move he fell forward into the mud, for his legs were held fast, almost to the thighs. He reached for the rope again but it was just beyond his reach.

"Now you've done it," he shouted, flinging himself about to loosen the grip on his legs, "we'll both be ruddy mud-fluke before long. A fine pal you turned out. I should have let you die, you were right there."

Culshaw moved a little, stung by the outburst.

"It's no use now, you damned idiot, I've lost the rope and I'm stuck myself. Keep still or you'll go right under—serve you right too."

The mud round his thighs had been pressed back a little and the water which had been squeezed out began to seep down loosening the grip a little more. Using his machete as a spade he dug frantically until his right leg was uncovered below the knee. Quickly he switched to the other leg and soon had a channel leading to below that knee. The mud had begun to cover his right leg again but it was still soft and he was able to move it a little. Leaning forward he pressed against the mud then suddenly flung himself backwards. There was a loud sucking sound as the action tore his legs partly out of the slime. A few more twists and he was completely free—minus one boot.

Turning on to his stomach he squirmed his way to the nearest tree. His hands slipped on the trunk but, flinging his arm over a branch, he managed to drag himself up.

As he hung there gasping for breath he glanced at Culshaw. "Doesn't seem to have sunk very much," he observed, "he'll be all right for a minute or two on his back."

It was less painful to breathe now and, wiping his hands on his vest, he moved over to his friend, who turned his head, asking, "Are you all right now, Chalky?"

"Hell's Bells, are you still alive?"

"Leave me and go back to the others."

"What, after all I've been through trying to get you out? Not on your ruddy life, mate, you're coming with me whether you like it or not. Now listen," he went on, "I'm going to fling a few branches in to make a path. We'll climb out over them. Stay where you are for a few more minutes."

Having made his path of branches he went over to the pulley tree and, tying the rope firmly, gently lowered

himself on to the branches. He lay still for a second or two, then, as they seemed to bear his weight, he scrambled over to Culshaw.

"Now do as I say or I swear I'll push your head under. I want you on your stomach first of all so while I pull at you, you twist and try to force yourself on to the branches."

At first their efforts were of no avail, then suddenly the suction broke, Culshaw flopping over. Inch by inch they wormed their way to the tree. While Culshaw rested there, Chalky set to making another path.

In this way they reached the stream and as they lay in the water Chalky burst out laughing. In high spirits once more, he slapped his pal on the chest. "Just think, Tom, back home women pay for these mud baths. Wait till I tell 'em about this one." He started to laugh again then stopped, saying sharply, "Hey, come on, don't look so gloomy, we're out of it now. Got any char in your pack?"

"It's all wet."

"So what? It's got to get wet some time. Where's your sugar?"

The sun had gone down as they finished the hot drink. Not wishing to stay the night here, Chalky forced his pal to his feet and they moved on.

With Chalky half supporting, half carrying him, they made slow progress, the swift tropical night soon enveloping them. In spite of the darkness they had to keep on the move, for there was no place for them to spend the night. Every few yards the sick man rested whilst Chalky felt for his marks on the trees. It seemed a long time before he caught his head on some obstruction which he discovered to be his own pack. Transferring Culshaw's few belongings he discarded the surplus pack.

From hereon progress was even slower because Dingy had not been too exact in marking the trees, the cuts occurring at varying numbers of paces, necessitating longer

halts while Chalky, cursing volubly, hunted for them. Falling over unseen obstacles in the stygian darkness, bruised, scratched and covered in slime, they plodded on, hour after hour. Culshaw would have given in several times had his friend not kept him going by talking of home and reminding him of his mother and girl friend who were waiting for his return. At last, however, thoroughly worn out, he was incapable of carrying on.

"Come on, Tommy boy, just force yourself along for a few steps and you'll find yourself walking automatically."

"I can't, Chalky, I'm finished."

"Finished" be blowed, you're tired, that's all. I'm on my knees myself, so I'm sure you must be. Anyway, keep your pecker up and in a few days we'll all probably be out of here. With luck we may catch one of the columns up then you'll soon be in India. Think of those juicy steaks we'll be eating on leave in Calcutta or Bombay."

"No, Chalky, I won't be going out."

"Of course you will. You don't want to talk like that. Here, hold this mess-tin while I get some char out. Now then, where was I? Oh yes, listen Tommy, don't give in so easily or you'll soon go under. I know it's no fun for you being sick, but you must try to forget it and keep plodding on. Have you had anything to eat to-day? No. Well I'll make you some biscuit burgu, if I've any biscuits left. Should have one or two 'cos I don't like 'em. If it'll make you feel any better I'll ask the Corp if I can look after you all the time in future."

"It won't be for very long, anyway. I'm dying—no, don't stop me—I can feel it. I'm sure I should have died back there if you hadn't come just when you did. I saw my mother as plain as I can see you now."

"But your mother's not dead."

"I know, but I saw her standing there. It . . . it's difficult to explain."

"Here, eat your pobbies while we're talking."

After a few mouthfuls he put the mess-tin down.

"Sorry Chalky, but I can't eat them."

"But you've got to keep your strength up even if you force it down. I'll feed it to you. Remember doing this to my kid sister when she was little. I like kids. You going to get married and have a family, buddy? Um! Gone to sleep on me, have you? Come on, you can't sleep here. Stand up until I fix things for you."

Donovan found them next morning only half a mile or so from where he had camped, tied to trees to escape the mud; fast asleep.

The Corporal had come across a small area of firmer ground late the previous afternoon and had made camp. They carried Culshaw in and laid him down. He fell asleep again immediately.

"Got any grub left, Corp? I gave Tommy my last few biscuits," requested Chalky.

"You are just in time to join us, we haven't had breakfast yet," replied Donovan. "Think he will be able to move on soon?" he asked, nodding towards the sleeping figure.

"Doubt whether he'll move on at all, Bob, unless it's up there," said Chalky relating the events of the previous hours.

"Well we can't stay here, Corp, he may never recover and we're short of grub as it is," Rawnley interposed.

"I'm well aware of that." Donovan pushed his hat back to run his fingers through his rumpled hair. "On the other hand we can't leave him, and we know how difficult it was carrying him for that short distance this morning."

"This is only an idea and it may not work," suggested Stormy, "but how about making a narrow raft. We could tie him on and rig some sort of shelter over him." His voice faded away indecisively.

The corporal pondered over the suggestion for a moment.

"It's got possibilities. There may be snags to it of course, but right now it is the only feasible idea that has been put forward. As you suggested it, Stormy, I'll put you in charge of construction with the temporary rank of Admiral of the Fleet. Get Evans and Kachindit to give you a hand. Chalky, as soon as you have had a bite to eat try to get some shut-eye in."

With Kachindit's expert knowledge a bamboo raft was soon completed. The sick man was made as comfortable as possible before being lashed into position.

With two men towing the raft, Donovan forced the pace as much as he could to make up the time they had lost. They hadn't been on the move very long before Stormy stopped the raft, telling them all to keep quiet whilst he listened. For some seconds no unusual sound reached their ears and they were beginning to fidget when a shrill whistle drew their nerves taut. An answering whistle came from nearer to hand as they stood there in a moment of indecision.

As the corporal had pushed on ahead, accompanied by Rawnley, Stormy knew that he had to decide the course of action—and hated the thought. He could feel himself trembling inwardly and hoped the others did not notice it; he longed for the strength of Donovan to lean upon.

"What do we do, Corp, fight?" asked Evans casually.

His naturally steady voice calmed Stormy's nerves, and looking round at them in turn he said slowly, "Yes, I think this is where we fight. Chalky, you and Hoppy take the raft and push on as fast as you can." His voice quickened as he made his decision and he began to feel his old self again. It was as if a great weight had been lifted from his brain. "If we don't catch you up before you reach the corporal let him know the position and tell him to carry on without us. Go to it now."

White teeth flashed in Chalky's grimy face as he turned to go. "Teaki, Stormy, and good luck. I hope there

aren't a lot of them." He and Hoppy disappeared into the smelly green wall of the swamp, dragging the raft behind them.

Stormy was already issuing his orders to the remainder. Then they waited—for whatever was to come.

Minutes later there appeared—one lone Jap! Perched in the trees, well hidden by the foliage, the Britishers watched him coming and made not a move. Stormy looked beyond him, and when the expected patrol did not appear he began to wonder. "They are either crazy, or blasted clever," he mused, "and I can't think which."

The Jap was probing cautiously forward when another whistle sounded from over to his right. Jumping into the cover of the trees he put his fingers to his lips to emit a long shrill reply. For a moment longer he waited, occasionally peering round the tree to make sure all was clear, then, stepping into the turbid water, he came on.

When Evans dropped on to him the Jap collapsed under his weight, his adversary's legs wrapped tightly round his body, and was thrust under the water before he could utter a sound. A savage stab with a bayonet, a few gurgling bubbles, and it was over in a twinkling. For a minute or two longer Evans continued to apply pressure to the writhing form, but at last he unlocked his legs and stood up, the water around him slowly darkening with blood.

With a soft "plop" Stormy dropped from his tree into the mud. "Good work, Evans," he said, patting the grinning figure on the shoulder. "You did a marvellous job there and I'll see that it gets known in the right quarters."

Evans' grin spread even further. "Thanks a lot, Corp. Think I'll get the M.M.?"

"That I cannot say. If it were left to me you would, but you know how these things are. I suppose it depends on whether the brigade has used up its quota." Stormy

bent forward and, heaving the dead Jap out of the water, pushed him on his back in the mud. He went methodically through his belongings as Evans chattered on.

"My Dad got the D.C.M. at Gallipoli in the last war, and even as a kid I swore I'd be as good a soldier as he was and get a medal to prove it."

Stormy passed a few clips of Jap ammunition into Roberts' hand, motioning to Scrounger to take hold of the Jap's feet. Struggling into the mud for a few yards they flung their burden face downwards into the greedy mire, Scrounger giving it a hateful push with his boot.

They waited a few moments longer, then as no patrol followed up the lone, now dead, adventurer, Stormy beckoned them to follow him.

"Your father was a regular soldier, wasn't he, Don?" asked Stormy as they waded through the murky water, forcing aside the weeds with their feet.

"Yes, he had done nineteen years when he got killed on the Frontier." Evans was silent for a moment. Stormy respected the silence, leaving him with his thoughts. "He was a sergeant when he got killed, and I remember him as a firm but good man," he continued. "I didn't see a great deal of him because he was serving in India for many years. As a matter of fact, shortly after I was born my mother returned to India to rejoin Dad, and she hadn't been back long before she died of malaria. 'Course it was a more deadly disease then than it is now."

"I had been left with an aunt, my father's sister, and it was decided after Mother's death that she should bring me up. Dad used to visit me whenever possible and we had some fine times together, altogether too rare of course, but when I was ten he spent a whole year in England, and it was then that I really got to know him. We would go out into the country with our fishing tackle, taking some sandwiches for lunch. As we waited for the fish to bite

he would tell me tales of his travels in all parts of the world. Tales which left me open-mouthed and wide-eyed with wonder. Oh, he was my hero all right. It was during these twelve months that I decided to join the army when I was old enough and I mentioned it to Dad. He made arrangements for me to go to an Army Boys' School as soon as possible.

"I had been there six months when Dad was killed, and I was so heart-broken that I ran away from the school, back to my aunt's. She used to tell me stories about my dad, real proud of him she was, and when she said, 'Your dad was broken-hearted when your mother died but he didn't run away from the army, he was a real soldier was your dad,' I decided to return to the army school and become a 'real soldier' like him."

The splashing and squelching of the water around their legs was the only sound for a few minutes, then another shrill whistle came from their right, slightly farther away this time.

"The monkeys are still around apparently," snarled Scrounger. "What you doing?" he asked as Stormy stopped and placed his fingers in his mouth.

Instead of replying, Stormy gave vent to a good imitation of the Japs' whistle, grinning as he wiped his fingers on his already wet shirt. "Let the little devils go on thinking their pal is O.K. and still on the job. It will give us time to make our getaway most likely."

Scrounger's eyes shone with admiration. "Say," he drawled, "that's a damn good idea. A brilliant idea." He slapped his muddy thigh and laughed hoarsely.

"How long have you been in the army now then, Don?" asked Stormy as they continued on their way.

"Well let me see, I'm twenty-two now and I joined the Boys' School when I was ten, so all told I've done twelve years. After four years at the school I enlisted in the

Regular Army for nine and three, the nine to start when I was seventeen and a half so there were three and a half years buckshee for the King."

"Ever regretted joining?"

"Mm, no, not really. Although I was so young when I went to the school that I don't know much about Civvy Street, and listening to these other lads talking about it interests me. I've still got over four years to do but I don't think I'll rejoin. I rather fancy a bash at Civvy Street."

"Civilian life's all right," replied Stormy, "but it isn't as glamorous as these chaps make out. You've still got to fight. You fight for a job and for a decent wage to keep your family—for most men in Civvy Street acquire a family—you've got to find somewhere to live and you are continually fighting to make ends meet. There are clothes to buy, food to buy, the rent to pay, etc. I haven't been through it all myself because I was more fortunate than most, but I'm right all the same. On the other hand, there is no one to order you around, except the boss at work and the wife at home," he grinned. "You can have some good times, but don't take everything these lads say as Gospel, for most of them were too young to know much about civilian life before they joined up."

"Aye, I suppose there's something to be said for the army. Your pay's always there, food and a place to sleep found for you while somebody else does all the worrying. But I still think I'll have a crack at Civvy Street. What appeals to me is a picture I have in my mind of sitting in an easy chair in front of a roaring fire, on a cold winter's night, my slippers on my feet and reading the paper. The only trouble is I'm a bit afraid to try it. I know my job in the army but I'm puzzled as to what to go in for in Civvy Street."

"Watch this branch," said Stormy as he let it spring back into place. "Have a look round when you go home

on leave ; you will probably find some work which takes your fancy. What's that, Robbo ? ”

“ We've caught Chalky up. He's just in front.”

Meanwhile Donovan and Rawnléy had got some way ahead, unaware of the drama being enacted behind them. The corporal wore a very worried expression as he gazed about him at the thinning trees and struggled through the weeds which had choked the stream almost out of existence, clogging underfoot in a thick slippery mass.

Soon the trees gave out altogether, and they saw before them a large expanse of what at first sight appeared to be grassland but proved on investigation to be weedy swamp. Donovan estimated its width at two miles, but it covered a great length across their front. They waded in for some way and found that the water was only waist deep.

Whilst waiting for the others to catch up they cut strong sticks for each member of the party.

At the sight of the swamp Hoppy was ready to give up and turn back. Several of the others regarded it dubiously, but Donovan hardly gave them time to think about it. Explaining that they had to cross some time and that it was better to do so in daylight, he told them that he would lead, followed by Scrounger, as they were the two tallest. Stormy would bring up the rear to take care of the raft. They each tied the towing rope round their wrist in case of accidents and waded in.

The grass twined round their ankles and would have brought them down but for the rope. At times it was so thick that the raft rode on top instead of through it, making terribly hard work of the pulling. Dark clouds filled the sky and it became oppressively hot. Glancing anxiously at the shore, Donovan saw that it seemed no nearer although they had covered some distance.

Faster and still faster, until they were panting from

their exertions, he forced them on, dreading the coming storm. It grew darker and unbelievably warmer when, without warning, Chalky fainted, dragging Roberts down with him. Pandemonium reigned for a few moments as everyone shouted advice and tried to pull him from the water, then Stormy slipped his hands from the rope, shouted to them to keep it taut and, grabbing hold of Chalky, jerked him clear.

As they revived him, Roberts pointed to the leeches on Chalky's chest and neck. Hoppy immediately tore open his own shirt, letting out a terrified screech when he saw a few on his chest.

"Calm yourself, man," shouted Donovan, "you've had leeches on you before."

"We'll all bleed to death before we reach the other side," screamed the demented Hoppy. "It's you that brought us here, you murderous swine. I'll settle you." Before anyone was aware of his intentions he brought his rifle up and fired a couple of rounds at Donovan. The shots went wide of the mark owing to the tug on the rope and Hoppy's agitated condition. Flinging the rifle from him he started to pull the leeches from his body, mouthing foul curses at Donovan, until Evans slapped him hard across the face.

Hoppy reached for Evans's throat. The situation was rapidly getting out of control as they grappled with each other when, with the swiftness usual in the tropics, the heavens opened up, a solid wall of driving rain enclosing them. The force of the deluge stunned them for a few moments, making them forget their own squabbles in the face of Nature's overpowering fury.

The storm brought the sky down until it hung just overhead. Gusts of wind accompanied the rain, whipping up the surface of the water into tiny waves which the rain immediately battered into spouts of foam.

"Don't stand there gaping," bawled Donoyan, as they clustered in a group. "This rain will raise the level of the water, so we've got to pull like hell if we don't want to drown."

"Let's go back," screeched Hoppy against the roar of the downpour.

"Too late. We may never get across if we don't do it now. No time for arguing, we've got to move," shouted back the corporal. Putting his head down against the stinging rain he plunged forward. Without looking back he felt the tug of the rope as the others took the strain in turn.

Urged on to superhuman effort by the threat of the rain, they cleaved their way through the swamp, tearing away the weed which impeded their progress as frantically they fought to keep their feet on the slippery bottom. The water rose slowly but irresistibly until it had crept a couple of inches up their chest.

Ignoring the searing pains in their lungs, they forced themselves on and on, driven by the knowledge that they must reach higher land.

The raft caught fast in the weed and pulled them back, sending some of the smaller men under the water. Unable to see the obstruction because of the darkness and the impenetrable sheets of water, they strained at the rope independently. The fierce pulls bore down the obstruction, causing the raft to shoot forward again, flinging them off balance.

Almost sobbing with weariness it seemed to them that the rain would never cease, so long did it pound them, but at last the skies began to lighten. Just as suddenly as it began, the rain stopped and the sun came out again. An evil-smelling steamy vapour rose from their clothes and the swamp, but they hardly noticed it. All that mattered was that it was no longer raining.

Kachindit, being smaller than the others, was having great difficulty in keeping his feet because of the deep water. Evans shouted to Donovan to explain his plight.

"We're not far from the shore now," replied the corporal, turning round, "so let him hang on to the raft for a while until we get to shallower water. . . . The raft! Quick, to the raft," he shouted.

Turning, they gaped open-mouthed with astonishment when they saw that it was—empty!

Chalky moved first. Slipping his hand free from the rope he splashed over to it, quickly followed by the others.

"It's upside down," gasped Stormy. "Quick lads, over with it." Struggling in the chest-deep water they finally managed to right it.

Almost before it had splashed over on to its right side Chalky had brushed the tangled weeds from his friend's face and was shaking him by the shoulders. "Tommy," he cried desperately, "Tommy, you can't die."

Awkwardly they stood silently by, watching his agony, then, as he slashed at the ropes binding Culshaw's body, Evans touched his arm. "It's no good buddy—he's gone."

"Quick Don, give me a hand," pleaded Chalky. "We may be able to revive him."

"Sorry Chalky, but there's not a hope," said Donovan, placing his arm tenderly round the youngster's shoulders. "It must have turned over back there during the storm."

Wrenching free, Chalky flung himself at the raft, breaking down completely.

The corporal made as if to stroke the sobbing back, but withdrew his hand and looked round pleadingly at the others.

"Here now, old pal," soothed Evans as he loosened the gripping fingers from the dead man's hair. "Don't take on like this. It had to be and you wouldn't really want to bring him back to suffer more, would you? Poor old Tom

was dying anyway; we all knew that, so it's probably a blessing that he's gone a little bit quicker."

The anguished sobbing ceased as he spoke. Sheepishly Chalky stood upright, wiping the tears from his face with the back of his hand. "What are you going to do with him?" he asked, his voice breaking between the words.

"—Seeing we're so close to the shore we'll take him along and try to find a bit of solid ground to bury him in."

"Thanks, Corp. I wouldn't like to think of him floating around in this stuff until the leeches, etc., finish him off."

"Don't see what difference it makes," said Scrounger. "The worms or ants will get 'im anyway. If we find any solid ground, that is."

"I guess we'll bury him anyway," replied Evans. "We'll even bury you when your time comes, Scrounger."

"Don't be so ruddy clever, you little squirt," growled Scrounger, "or I'll bury you 'ere and now—with me fist."

"That will do, you two," Donovan butted in, "this is no time for squabbling. We'd better get moving because the water will continue to rise for a time as it drains from the hills. Kachindit can hang on to the raft if he likes."

Kachindit, however, did not like being in such close proximity to the dead man, so had to make the best of it as sombrely they headed for the shore.

When they drew near they saw that beyond the screen of timber on the shore-line the country appeared to be undulating grassland dotted here and there with small bushes.

"Looks as though we leave the swamp here, boys," announced the corporal. "Stormy, you and Roberts push on to find a decent bivvy for us for the night."

At last the water shoaled, the weeds thinned out, finally disappearing as the muddy bottom gave way to sand. The sand-bar reached out three or four hundred yards from the shore, and with the evil smell from the swamps

receding they splashed eagerly through the knee-deep water, their spirits rising with every step nearer the land. All except Chalky who was feeling downcast over his friend's death.

Stormy and Roberts had chosen a small glen, shaded by the trees, with a narrow stream which ran into the lake passing close by. They had a fire going, and by the time the others came up carrying the raft with Culshaw's body on it, had stripped off and were busy leech-hunting.

"Come in, fellows, we've got a nice cosy little place here. James, bring some whisky for these gentlemen," said Stormy, airily motioning to an imaginary manservant. "You don't need to dress for dinner, chaps, because I do not think we have anything to eat, unless, of course, you would care to try pickled leeches, a rare delicacy in these parts," he laughed.

"Rare!" exploded Roberts. "Me legs was so black wi' 'em I fought they was dirty."

"When you've got rid of the blighters you had better go along to the stream to wash yourselves thoroughly in case their bites turn septic," said Donovan while they busied themselves burning the bloated leeches off with the glowing end of a stick.

"What's wrong with that foot of yours, Chalky?" he asked as he saw him dabbing at it with a handkerchief.

"It's a bit swollen, Bob. I lost my boot yesterday when I went back for Tommy and it got cut up a bit crossing the lake. Be all right by morning I suppose."

"Think you could get Culshaw's boot on?" asked Donovan, bending over to prod gently at the swelling.

"I guess so, but I don't fancy it."

"Don't be daft, why he would be only too glad to help you out, especially as you lost yours on his account. They're no good to him now anyway. Here, Dingy, have a look at Chalky's foot before you go down for a wash. Stormy,

you and Roberts are nearly ready now so you can start digging a grave for poor Culshaw. Evans, I want you and Kachindit to come with me on a short patrol before it gets dark."

The grave had been dug and Chalky was laboriously carving his friend's name and number on a bamboo cross when Donovan's party returned. After going through the dead boy's pockets the body was tied in a ground-sheet, carried over to the shallow grave and almost hastily dumped in. Donovan said a few words, feeling ill equipped to perform the task, and the grave was quickly filled in.

"Now for some food, I'm starving. Umph! Not a great deal left, have we. We'll have to make it spin out, though," he murmured as he surveyed their scanty provisions. "Kachindit, you go and collect a few bamboo shoots for vegetables. Savvy? Oh, you tell him, Evans, whilst we get on with the stew."

Little as it was, the food temporarily filled a small place in their stomachs. When they had finished eating they sat round the fire, surrounded by the darkness, speaking very little on account of Culshaw's death. Suddenly Rawnley, who was sorting out his pack, let out a yell.

"What is it? Have you been bitten?" queried Donovan.

"Bitten be blowed. I've found a fag. Don't crowd round now, it's wet and we don't want it damaged."

Placing the soaked cigarette reverently on a tin lid close by the fire they all sat staring at it as if it were some precious stone. Eventually, when it was dry, Rawnley lifted it carefully out. The others watched him silently as he lit it and took a long draw.

"Still damp and hard to draw, but it certainly is good after being without for so long," he remarked, passing it on to Hoppy. Slowly he expelled the smoke from his lungs, sighing contentedly.

From hand to hand, round the silent circle of men

sitting cross-legged in the firelight, passed the cigarette, growing ever smaller until, regretfully, it had gone.

"I wonder when we will get another one," mused Stormy.

"I wonder if we'll get another one," mumbled Hoppy.

"Y'know, I've just been thinking about poor old Tommy," announced Evans. "It makes you think whether there is such a thing as God when someone like him goes. Never hurt anyone intentionally, I shouldn't think."

"Fate," stated Scrounger with finality. "If your turn's come you've 'ad it no matter what y'do."

"I think he died because he led too sheltered a life in Civvy Street," said Dingy, "for when he came up against some exceptionally hard knocks he hadn't got the constitution to stand up to them."

"Yes, it's a sad thing to say," agreed Chalky, "but his mother's love killed him. As Dingy says, she protected him all his life, wouldn't even let him play with the other boys in the street, and since we got cut off he has been worried stiff because his mother will have been notified that he's missing."

"The poor lad was so distracted that he did not realise it would be better for him to turn up eventually rather than his mother being notified of his death, and with being ill and worrying so he lost the will to live," said Stormy.

"Balmy devil," muttered Hoppy.

"Anyway when a bloke gets so as 'e doesn't want to live it's time he was dead," voiced Scrounger.

Donovan did not like the subject of the conversation. He had been waiting for an opportunity to change it and, breaking into the pause which followed Scrounger's statement, said, "A lot of tramps! That's what we are, nothing more or less than a lot of tramps. Just look round at yourselves. Stormy there with his thick black face-fungus almost hiding him from view—in his case welcome.

Johnny Aston here with his untidy beard and villainous looking 'tashé'." Laughter rippled round the circle as he pointed to where Hoppy sat crouching more humped-backed than ever, his balding head shining in the fire-glow. "Look at old grumpy there, the original of the seven dwarfs."

The corporal guffawed loudly as Hoppy scowled at him, grumbling, "Dunno about tramps, but I know you're a crackpot. Always said you were doolali before we came in."

"Naw, mite, we're skeletons," put in Roberts, leaping into the fray, "nofink but skin an' bones. 'Cor blimey, d'y'know every time I turn over in me sleep I'mike such a clatter I wakes meself up."

"I'll agree with you there, Robbo," laughed Evans. "Your eyes are so far back in their sockets if they go any farther you'll be able to see through the back of your head."

Stormy lay back as Donovan led them on in the banter: "You are both right, too," he thought, "we are like skeletons and tramps. I never realised we were so thin and ragged until just now. I don't suppose we noticed it too much, everyone being alike. What a sight we are, though, tattered clothing, long hair, unkempt beards, no wonder Donovan laughs, although he is as bad as the rest of us. I wonder if he is really as unconcerned as he seems? I wish I had his calmness, anyway. It looks to me as though we are heading for the end of the road and I feel glad. Death will be a blessed relief from my thoughts, but I don't suppose it will come until I have paid the full penalty. It must be almost nine years ago. God, how time flies, and yet I can see it as clearly as though it were happening right now. . . . Uh! What is it? Are they coming?"

"C'mon, wake up, Stormy." Donovan shook him by the shoulders. "Been dreaming about Japs? We were just thinking of turning in when you screamed."

Stormy glanced round at the bearded faces in the dying firelight, slowly the realisation of his surroundings came back to him. "Dreaming? Yes I must have been. Did I say anything?"

"No, but you didn't half yell, Corp," replied Chalky. "Nearly made me jump out of my skin."

"I guess it's about time we turned in, lads," Donovan told them, going over to where his pack lay. "We've had a tiring day and a long one. I'm all set for some shut-eye. No need for any guards to-night. If any Japs are around here they deserve to capture us."

Chapter 8

THE sun was up; it was already hot and sticky when they awoke at Evans's cry of "Hey, wakkey wakey, rise and shine, the morning's fine."

Hoppy stretched, yawned loudly and asked, "What's for breakfast, Bob?"

"Breakfast! Where do you think you are, the Ritz? You can nip down to the stream to get a drink if you like, but we can't spare any food."

"Can I graze for a while, Corp, before you saddle me up?" cackled Roberts.

"We may be doing that before we're finished," retorted Donovan, brushing aside the sandflies which were already biting at the corners of his eyes.

"Them perishin' mozzies 'ad their breakfas' a'right though. Fact they've had a darned good bust up," stated Roberts, making deep crosses with his thumbnail on the numerous swellings resulting from the bites of the mosquitoes which had pestered them all night.

"We've got enough rations left for one good meal," announced the corporal when he and Stormy had finished sorting out the contents of their packs, "but by going extra careful we can make it last a couple of days. How long it will be before we get any more rests with God. If you see anything move, animal or reptile, kill it."

Hoppy started to get up and Roberts grabbed for his rifle. "Which is 'e?" he shouted, ducking as Hoppy flung his empty pack.

"Ammunition's not too bad," went on Donovan after the laughter had subsided. "Four grenades, half a dozen full magazines for the automatic and about twenty rounds for each rifle."

"Don't forget my explosives," put in Chalky, struggling to remove his boot.

"That's going in the river when we leave, it's too heavy. What are you trying to do with that boot?"

"I'm trying to get it off, but my foot has swollen a lot during the night and it's stuck."

"Leave it where it is, then, you chump. Get it off and you'll never get it back on. Go and bathe your foot in the stream while we pack up. You might as well dump that explosive while you're about it."

"Not ruddy likely. What, after I've carried it all this way?"

"I said dump it," ordered Donovan. "It'll take you all your time to keep up as it is with that foot without lugging that stuff around."

"Well, if you leave this, you leave me," Chalky defied him, his face white with sudden anger. "But for this you'd never have got away from the river back there. This little box is worth all these pop-guns put together." Scornfully he kicked one of the rifles away.

Donovan reached for the box. "We'll have less of that,

White, when I give you an order you obey it. C'mon, hand it over," he snapped as Chalky thrust it behind him, backing away.

"Aw don't make such a fuss, Corp. Let 'im keep it," interrupted Evans.

Donovan whirled on him. "Mind your own business. I give the orders round here, not you."

"O.K., but keep your hair on or you won't be giving me orders for much longer," shouted little Evans, squaring up to him.

Grabbing his shirt, the corporal pulled him forward. "Don't threaten me or I'll . . ."

"Look out, Donovan," yelled Stormy.

Swinging round, the corporal was just in time to avoid the dah which Kachindit threw, but was bowled over as the native hurled himself on him.

"Quit it, all of you," instructed Stormy, menacing them with the automatic. "You are like a lot of kids. Evans, get Kachindit off or I'll shoot him."

"Now," he resumed when the struggling figures had been parted, "don't let us kill each other over a little thing like a box of explosives. Keep things in proportion at least. Chalky, why do you insist on carrying that box around with you? I should think you would be only too glad to get rid of the extra weight."

"It is a bit heavy, Stormy, but when I picked it up in that old bivvy area I got a strange feeling that it was going to get me out of this mess. The feeling was so strong that I'd rather throw the food away than this."

"What about you, Bob, why are you so intent on getting rid of it?"

Donovan was rather shaken at the way Stormy had taken over things, but he answered. "It's only for his own sake, and ours. I've been through all our kit discarding everything that isn't absolutely vital and it seems

damned silly to leave behind spare shirts, etc., when he's lugging a ruddy great box along."

"It's not a ruddy great box . . ." began Chalky, but Stormy motioned him into silence.

"Well, lads, we've heard both sides. Chalky wants to carry it because of a hunch he has, whilst the corporal thinks it should be left because he considers it to be surplus to the bare necessities for our existence. Hunches are queer things and personally I do not think we should ignore it. Normally I would agree with the corporal for he has common sense on his side, but our situation is not exactly a normal one. I am inclined to a compromise. Chalky can carry the explosive so long as it doesn't cause him to drop out or lag behind. Also it must not prevent him from carrying his fair share of the other kit. At the first sign of either he must leave it behind. We'll have a show of hands to decide it, and remember that we must all stick together and work as a team without these petty squabbles or we might as well lie down right here and struggle on no further. Now, Bob and Chalky, will you agree to whatever is decided?"

Both having nodded their agreement, Stormy called for a show of hands. "Chalky wins," he announced. "Come on now, let's get moving, we have wasted enough time as it is."

Chalky jumped over to Donovan with outstretched hand. "No hard feelings, Corp? I'll probably be glad to sling it before long."

The corporal hesitated for a moment only before gripping the proffered hand and breaking into a grin. "We must all be a bit crackers fighting over a thing like that. You'll be blowing us all up one of these days, though."

Leaving the night's camp-site they moved out into a country of small but steep hillocks covered with a hard stubble of coarse hard grass and scattered bush. In the far

distance, shimmering in the heat haze, loomed a range of hills whose highest peaks showed jagged against the skyline. With no particular objective in mind, Donovan made for them.

Glad to break away from single file they spread out, scattering a little. They had been on the move for some time when Stormy caught the corporal up. For a while they marched along in silence until at last he murmured, "Sorry for taking over, Bob, but things seemed to be getting out of hand."

Donovan hitched his pack into a more comfortable position and tucked his thumbs under the shoulder straps before replying. "Good job you did. Thanks for the warning by the way. The way he came at me, Kachindit was all set for a kill."

They walked along without speaking for a few minutes. "That was a bad mistake on my part, Stormy, starting that row. I should have seen the way things were going and backed out. Actually I did realise that I'd rubbed Chalky up the wrong way, but when Evans joined in I allowed my temper to get the better of my reason and you saw the result." They panted up to the top of yet another hill. "I liked the way you held court, though. Sounded like a pukka lawyer. You've been in charge of men before, Stormy; how come you're only a lance-corporal now? I should have thought an educated chap like you would have gone in for a commission." When Stormy made no answer he glanced sideways and said, "Sorry for shutting in on your private affairs. No need to tell me if you don't want to."

"I'd rather not, Bob, if you don't mind. I don't think anyone could really understand my story anyway. Gosh, but it certainly is hot." Stormy mopped the sweat from his face and neck.

For two days they plodded monotonously toward the

distant mountains, parched by a relentless sun during the day and smitten with plagues of mosquitoes at night.

A little excitement was caused as they were about to bivouac for the second night when Kachindit killed a six-feet long snake. Jabbering delightedly he commenced immediately to skin it.

"Wot's 'e doing, Don," Roberts asked Evans, "goin' ter mike 'imself some shoes?"

"I rather think he intends eating it," suggested Stormy.

"Well, if he can eat it so can we," declared Donovan. "We've got only enough food left for one meal, so we'll save it for to-morrow. Dingy, you and Scrounger go along to the chaung for some water while we get the fire going."

"Ah'll 'ave me rations. Ah'm non eatin' yon muck," said Hoppy sullenly.

"Your rations! You haven't any rations, they belong to the section, and I'm not opening our last tin of meat for your benefit only. Anyway, this is no time for a squeamish stomach. If you're hungry you'll eat it like the rest of us."

Kachindit soon had the meat cooked and attacked his portion ravenously. They sat watching him for a time, but Roberts suddenly got up and bolted for the bushes. They heard him vomiting and left their dinner untouched. Looking somewhat pale he soon returned. "Plenty of room fer it now, cock," he said, grinning self-consciously, and as an act of bravado he picked up his mess-tin, gingerly popping a small piece of snake into his mouth, meanwhile closing his eyes and screwing up his face. He rolled it round his mouth for a moment, chewed it, then swallowed. "Blimey, it's not bad. A bit like roast chicken." He popped some more into his mouth, seeming to enjoy the taste.

"Well I don't suppose it's any worse than them Froggies

eating snails and frogs' legs," Evans said when they had all finished eating. "You should have had some, Hoppy."

"Ah baint a ruddy cannibal," came the snarled reply.

Roberts burst into his cackling laughter.

"Wot's up wi' thee?" asked Hoppy.

"If y' fink eating snake mikes you a cannibal, cock, you must be a perishin' snake yerself," Robbo cracked back, still laughing.

Hoppy glowered at him but made no reply.

When the others awakened the following morning he was missing.

"Where's 'Oppy gorn, Corp, lookin' fer snakes?" joked Roberts, fastening his boot-laces.

"Probably gone for . . ." Donovan broke off, glancing at the vacant space. "That's funny, he's taken his ground-sheet and one of the rifles." Quickly he stepped over to the packs. "The rotten swine," he said softly, "he's pinched the grub, the whole lot." Flinging the empty pack from him he flopped down on to his groundsheet. "Aw, sugar it, what's the use in carrying on when your own blokes stab you in the back. I think I'll stay here and sleep for the rest of the day."

"Well I'm not staying here just because that rat pinched the grub," vowed Rawnley. "I wouldn't let him know it worried me so much."

"Yes, I guess you're right," agreed the corporal wearily. "Come on, lads, get a drink of water before we push on. I thought he had a sly look in his eyes when Robbo was pulling his leg last night, but I never even guessed he'd do a thing like that."

"What 'appens if we see him?" queried Scrounger. "What are yer goin' to do?"

"I don't know yet. I'll think about it."

He did not have long to think, however, for Hoppy was

hiding in a thicket not far away, and when he saw them preparing to move, called out, "Hey, Corporal Donovan. It's me, 'Oppy. What y' gonna do about the grub?"

"Where are you, you skunk?" shouted Donovan. "Ah, there you are. What am I going to do, you ask. Well, I'd like to put a bullet where you put our food." He laughed harshly as Hoppy scooted back into the shelter of the trees. "But that would be too quick for a rotter like you, so I'm gonna leave you to die on your own. Don't try to follow us, because if you do I'll have you shot like the thieving cur you are."

"You wouldn't do that to one of your own blokes just because of a tin of meat, Bob?" whined Hoppy, scared at the note of flat finality in the corporal's voice.

"When that tin of meat may mean the difference between us dying of starvation or living long enough to reach some more food, what happens to you interests me not the slightest, except that I hope you have a lingering death with the thought of that stolen food weighing on your mind until it drives you stark raving mad."

"You can't let me die like that, Bob," pleaded Hoppy, crawling partly out of the thicket.

Crack! There was a spurt of dust close to Hoppy's head as a rifle report echoed sharply in the morning air. Donovan knocked the gun from Scrounger's grasp before he could fire another round. "What the hell are you doing, you interfering devil?"

"The dirty rat should be killed for pinching our grub," protested Scrounger, equally angry. "Anyway, you're no angel leaving him to die. I say finish him off. What do you others think?"

"It's all the same to me what happens to him, but don't let's stay here wasting time and energy or we'll all starve to death," said Evans.

"Hear, hear," agreed St. John. "I don't fancy shooting one of our own chaps anyway, but I do think we should push on."

"Right, Stormy, you go on with the others. I'll catch you up later. In the meantime I'll make sure Hopkinson doesn't follow."

Hoppy ran out from the cover of the bushes when he saw Stormy and his party leaving, but scampered back again as Donovan roared at him, "Get back in your hole, you rat, or I'll shoot you." He then stood in plain view until the others were out of sight.

Hoppy's desperate cries as he pleaded with Donovan rang in their ears, "God, it's horrible," whispered Dingy, coming to a halt. "Stormy, we can't leave him like this, we've got to go back. Those cries will haunt me if we don't."

Dave Rawnley pushed him forward again. "Don't be an idiot. You can't do any good by going back. The corp's right, we couldn't let him stay with us after what he's done, and while there's life there's hope."

"Not much."

"Jammy devils like him don't die easy," retorted Chalky. "He'll most likely get out before us and he won't worry about you, believe me. If you want to worry about someone, worry about me, this leg is killing me."

"I'll have a look at it when we halt," said Dingy as they moved forward again.

Donovan did not catch up with them until after noon.

"I'm fagged," he announced as he approached. "Hung on for ages with that devil screaming for mercy all the time. Nearly drove me crackers. Almost had to run to shake him off, but managed to lose him a few miles back. Seen anything to cat?"

"Not a darned thing," replied Stormy, mopping his face. "Kachindit and Evans have gone on ahead to see if they

can spot anything. Like a far ^{as} over now, Bob, this heat is getting me down?"

"Yes, you don't look so good. Feeling all right?"

"I'll be O.K. We must push on."

Some time later they were still moving wearily on, automatically dragging their feet forward, heads hanging loosely downwards, the reflection of the fierce sun beating up from the cracked, parched earth, smarting their sweat-soaked eyes, when Rawnley croaked through dry lips, "Listen, feller, a plane."

"Don't be so blasted funny," began Stormy, then he too heard the distant hum of engines. "Bot, it is a plane. Let's signal it," he shouted excitedly.

"There it is," cried Dingy, pointing to a speck in the blue, cloudless sky rapidly growing larger, "heading straight for us."

"C'mon, wave, all of you," shouted Donovan hoarsely.

As the aircraft drew nearer they could see that it would pass some distance from them. They went nearly frantic in their efforts to attract attention.

"They'll never see us," bewailed Stormy. "Have we nothing white to wave?"

"Have we hell, everything's dyed blasted green. . . . I've got it! Quick, lads, off with your shirts and dance about, they may spot our white skins."

The plane droned on toward the hills. They stood watching it, hope dying in their hearts.

"Here's some more," yelled Rawnley, spinning round as his ears picked up the sound of their engines. They commenced to jump about, waving their clothing, but the planes flew steadily on unheeding.

Chalky flopped wearily to the ground. "They'd most likely have taken us for Japs and gunned us anyway," he said, resting his head in the crook of his arm. He felt the earth tremble slightly.

A faint rumble reached their ears. "They're bombing," exclaimed Donovan. "There they go, can you see the smoke?"

Chalky scrambled to his feet, limping over to where the others clustered in a group.

"Go on, boyos, give 'em 'ell," cried Scrounger.

"Cor, that was a beauty," breathed Roberts as another puff of smoke appeared. "Bet it sent a few of 'em ter their blinkin' ancestors."

"Look out, Tojo, here they come," laughed Donovan, swiping Dingy across the back as the planes peeled off, diving to strafe. "Brother, am I glad I'm not down there."

"Don't know about that, there might be one of the columns there putting an attack in," said Rawnley, but no one appeared to notice the remark, standing sadly watching as the aircraft headed for home.

When they had disappeared from view Chalky broke the long silence, saying softly, "Just think, in about an hour, or even less, those chaps will be having a cup of char and a cake in the canteen."

"Or even a proper dinner," suggested Roberts wistfully. "I could just go fer some of those soya links an' beans nar. 'S'fact, mite, I'd swap me credits fer a tin of bully."

"You shouldn't be hungry, Robbo, you're always chewing the fat," grinned Donovan as they dressed again. "If we hadn't been such a scruffy dirty set of rascals they might have seen our white skins. Next stream we come to we'll all get scrubbed in case they come again."

"Hey, supposing Rawnley's right an' there is one of our columns o'er yon?" asked Scrounger. "Why not head that way an' join up wi' 'em?"

"Scrounger, I never thought you had that much sense in you." Donovan's eyes lit up at the thought. "Let's see, the bombing was there where there's a break in the hills." He pointed toward the spot. "It could be a pass of some

sort when you look closely.” He chuckled gleefully. “C’mon, me lads, let’s get weaving.”

“She’ll be ridin’ six white ’orses when she comes,” sang Roberts as they went on their way with jaunty steps.

That night they talked excitedly about their new hope before dropping off to sleep in ones and twos.

Presently, “You still awake, Chalky?” whispered Evans, who had rejoined them after his unlucky quest for food.

“Yes. Can’t get to sleep for this blasted foot.”

“I’ve been thinking. If we do get out how about you an’ me an’ Kachindit going to Bombay or Bangalore for a spot of leave together?”

“Kachindit! Who says they’ll take him out to India? They might just send him back to his village.”

“What, after all he’s done for us? No, if we tell ’em about him they’ll fly him out and let him join the Burma Rifles or something. I’ll kick up a stink if they don’t.”

After a time Chalky whispered, “Eh, Don, what you going to do about Kachindit when you get sent home?” but Evans was already asleep.

The throbbing pains in his foot prevented Chalky from going to sleep, although he dozed fitfully. At last he could stand it no longer. Sitting up on his groundsheet he drew his knees up, resting his head on them. He moaned softly, more from weariness than anything.

“Who’s that?” came a whisper from the darkness.

“It’s me. Is that you, Stormy? What are you doing awake?”

“I don’t feel too good. It’s the heat. I can feel it even now, burning into my brain like red-hot needles.”

“Yeah, it sure is hot in this valley. You’ll probably feel better when the coolness comes just before dawn.”

“Can’t you sleep either, Chalky? What is it? Your foot?”

"Yes, it's throbbing like blazes. Feels all tight inside my boot, as though it will burst out any minute. Wish I could take it off, but you know what the corp will say if I drop out now after that row we had."

"Why not take it off if it will make you feel any easier, and if you can't get it on in the morning we can cut your boot up to make some sandals or something. Here, I'll give you a hand."

As Stormy cut away the boot Chalky asked, "Think we'll ever get out of here, Stormy?"

"With a bit of luck, yes. Things are never quite as bad as they seem to be."

"It's a funny thing," continued Chalky, almost to himself. "When the war started I was only sixteen and barely out of school. I cursed the fact that I wasn't born two or three years earlier so that I could join up and have a crack. Imagined myself winning the V.C. and covering myself with glory so that on my frequent leaves the girls would almost fight amongst themselves for my company." He uttered a short, harsh laugh. "Now here we are with all the glamour stripped off, with just a faint glimmer of hope that we may be lucky enough to be rescued before we starve to death. It wouldn't be so bad if we were fighting the Japs, but all we're fighting is to keep alive."

"That feel better?" asked Stormy, easing the boot away.

"Still throbbing painfully but it doesn't feel so tight. Thanks a lot, buddy." Chalky rubbed lightly at his swollen foot.

Stormy lay back on his groundsheet, fanning his face with his bush-hat. "Phew! I'm still hot and sticky. What you have just said has most likely been said ever since men started fighting each other, for they've all discovered that war is a horrible business. Whichever side wins the men who fight never seem to benefit. The trouble is that once it is all over men look back and see only the lighter

side, remembering wistfully the comradeship that endured. It is then that the glamour returns and war is almost glorified as the finest initiation into manhood that a youth can have. If they could remember how bad it really is, and instil the horror of it into their sons' minds, war would be finished."

Chalky yawned loudly before replying. "Aye, I suppose you're right there. Yet it makes you wonder if wars are not accidental, but are ordered by fate as a means of thinning out the world population, for as the population increases so does each succeeding war kill more off. At the same time science progresses by leaps and bounds compared with a corresponding period of peace." He yawned again. "Anyway the pros and cons can be discussed indefinitely without a solution being reached, and I'm so tired I can hardly keep my eyes open. I've enjoyed our little chat though, Stormy. It's taken my mind off the problem of my stomach and my foot for a little while. Goodnight, pal."

"Goodnight, Chalky."

After a short but fierce dawn storm the sun came out and it soon became oppressively hot.

Chalky's foot was in a terrible condition, but he limped along as best he could with his improvised sandal.

They halted at mid-day in the shade of some bushes near a small stream. Dingy had found a packet of bouillon powder in his shirt pocket, and from it they made a very watery soup. When they had drunk it they lay back for a short rest before moving on again. No one spoke. Speech had, in fact, become a real effort; their brains seemed dull, pondering over every little problem. Limbs were likewise sluggish and unresponsive. The only thing which came easily was sleep. Had they not forced themselves to keep moving Donovan felt that they would have slept on into death.

Stormy had been behaving queerly all the morning, but

the others had not noticed it particularly, being too pre-occupied with dreams of food. Now he got groggily to his feet, mumbled something about water and, taking his chagul, headed for the stream.

Most of the section had fallen asleep and Kachindit was shaking Evans into wakefulness when Stormy returned. He came from the opposite direction to the stream, stumbling from bush to bush, bent almost double. Occasionally he dropped flat to crawl forward on his stomach. Evans watched him vacantly for a moment, but Kachindit quickly realised that something was wrong and woke the corporal up.

Stormy glanced furtively behind him as he came into camp. Going up to Donovan he whispered, "Get your men together, Sergeant, they're coming. Make your way slowly to the river and beware lest they get behind you. It's a big war party, but with covering fire from the machine-gun we should hold them off." Donovan had ceased to listen; he was already sending the others to their positions.

No attack developed, however, and Donovan had just told Dingy and Rawnley to scout forward when Stormy yelled, "Here they come! Fire your first volley when they get close, and watch your flanks."

Dingy and Dave Rawnley scrambled back to their places at his shout, being most surprised when the Japs still didn't appear.

Stormy continued to shout but his speech was becoming unintelligible. Donovan motioned to Roberts who was nearest. "Come with me," he said, "we'll soon see what's going on." Cautiously they went forward, keeping to the folds in the ground as much as possible.

"See anything?" enquired Donovan presently.

"Nar," replied Roberts, "only you."

The corporal stood up slowly. There was not a soul in

sight. Roberts watched him, then as no shots rang out, he, too, got to his feet.

"Wot d'yer mike o' this, Corp—sorry, Sarge?" he asked as they walked back. Without waiting for a reply he joked, "Didn't know yer'd got promoted. Never seen it on Orders."

"Don't be an ass," snapped Donovan a little peevishly, annoyed by Robbo's cackling laughter.

Waving his rifle threateningly, Stormy started shouting again when he saw them approaching. Donovan dragged the bewildered Roberts down and they were crawling away on their stomachs when Evans called out, "It's O.K., Corp, you can come now." Standing up warily, they saw that he had disarmed Stormy who sat with his head in his hands.

"Sun-happy," announced Evans laconically as they came up.

"Orf' is rocker, is 'e? No wonder 'e mide yer a sergeant." Roberts sat down holding his stomach as the laughter burst out once more, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Donovan gave him a disdainful look as he bent over Stormy. "Feels like heat stroke all right, he's very hot."

"Get him down to the water quickly," Dingy interposed.

"Here, lay him in the water where it's shallow," he instructed when they had reached the stream. "Give me a hand getting his shirt off, Chalky. That's it, now you hold his head while I get a cold compress. Corp, will you get a couple of chaps to waft their shirts over him? We must get his temperature down quickly."

As they worked on him Rawnley asked, "What was he on about out there? I thought we'd walked right into a regiment of Japs at first. Is he crackers?"

"'Course he's crackers. Daft as a two-bob brush he is. Wonder who he thought he was?"

"I fink 'e was an orficer. 'Ear 'im givin' orders to the sarge?" asked Roberts, ducking as Donovan swung a wet vest at his head.

"No, seriously, I wonder who he did think he was." Chalky looked puzzled. "He said something about a launch when he first came up."

"Cut the cackle and get on with your jobs," ordered Donovan, but he, too, was intrigued as he thought about Stormy's words.

By dint of much hard work they eventually got Stormy to break into a sweat. They were all exhausted by this time, so Dingy agreed to call a halt to their efforts although he was still not satisfied with Stormy's condition, warning Donovan that he would be unable to march again that day at least.

Opinions were divided as to whether the party should split up, some to go forward while a small rear-party remained with Stormy. No one seemed very willing to be on the rear-party. When Donovan suggested that they should all spend the remainder of the day here and sleep, they were so glad of the excuse that they fell in with the plan with alacrity.

Before leaving the stream, Dingy decided to have a look at Chalky's foot. When he finally got the sock off he saw that the foot and lower leg were in a putrifying state. Maggots were living in some of the larger ulcers and the whole foot was badly puffed up. After scraping away the rotting flesh with his jack-knife he put two or three leeches on the swelling, telling Chalky to rest up with his foot in the air.

The corporal divided the remainder into pairs for guard duties, mainly with the idea of having a watch kept on Stormy. Those not on guard were soon asleep and all went well until late afternoon. Roberts and Scrounger were supposed to be on guard but had dozed off. Scrounger

stirred first and was having a nice easy stretch when he suddenly remembered that he was on guard. He glanced quickly round the sleeping figures. Good God ! Stormy had gone !

"Eh, wake up," he urged Roberts who tried to shake off the offending hand and settle down again. "C'mon, yer chatterin' monkey, wake up. Stormy's gone."

The last words broke through the fog of Robert's brain like a bomb. He sat up suddenly, knocking his rifle over in the process. It fetched him a sharp crack across the skull as it fell. "Gorn. 'Oo 'as ? Where ?" he asked, rubbing his head.

"Stormy. Done a bunk. Well, don't just sit there rubbin' yer napper, we've got to get him back afore Donovan finds out. 'Ere, what's that ? Did y'ear anything ?"

"Only these ruddy flies buzzin'."

"Well, shurrup an' let me listen then," Scrounger interjected, cocking his head on one side. "There it goes again, from the river. Quietly now, don't wake the others."

Approaching the place from where the noise was issuing, Scrounger motioned to Roberts for caution. "Gotta watch our step," he breathed into his ear. "Got terrible strength when they're balmy. We'll try and humour him, and if that don't work I'll slug him."

Using his bush-hat as a bucket, Stormy worked furiously, carrying water from the stream to the bank where he flung it away and returned for more, meanwhile shouting orders to imaginary assistants. At least they sounded like orders to Scrounger and Roberts who lay hidden, but except for an occasional remark in English, the language completely baffled them.

"I've got an idea, cock," whispered Roberts. "It looks to me as though he's fire-fighting, so 'ow about us

joining in for a while an' we may kid 'im into finking it's out an' . . ." He broke off as Stormy looked up.

"There they are, the murd'rous swine," he yelled, suddenly charging forward in their direction. Leaping to their feet they ran as if Old Nick himself were after them.

Stormy didn't follow them far but hid in some bushes. They could hear him pretending to be a machine-gun.

"We'd better get 'im back. He'll be waking the others at this rate," panted Scrounger, stopping for breath.

"Aw, let 'im play on 'is own, I don't fink he wants us."

Finally picking up enough courage to return, they proceeded very cautiously, for Stormy had left his "machine-gun" and was strangely quiet. Creeping from tree to tree, Roberts spotted him first just as he slithered under some thick ferns. "Stormy, boy," he called, half afraid at the sound of his own voice and ready for instant flight should Stormy prove quarrelsome. "It's me, Robbo. Yer remember yer ole pal Jack Roberts, doncha? Everyfinks O.K. nar, yer can come back."

Backing out of the ferns, Stormy stood up, putting his hand on Robbo's shaking shoulder. Glancing around anxiously he asked quietly, "Have they gone, Kisawi? What happened to the others?"

"They've orl gorn, mite," Roberts assured him, hoping fervently that he was saying the right thing. Taking his arm he led him gently toward camp.

Scrounger appeared from behind a bush. "Have you got him?"

"Yus, Scrarnger. Nip back fer 'is titfer, will yer, while I 'ead 'im back home."

The brainstorm had passed and Stormy went along meekly enough, Roberts and Scrounger almost carrying him. No sooner had they placed him on his groundsheet than he fell asleep.

"Phew! Wot a flippin' life, nursemaid to a loony."

Roberts mopped the sweat from his face with a dirty piece of rag. "I'm on me knees."

"So'm I," agreed Scrounger. "It must be about time for us to change guard, so let's wake the next lot up afore 'e 'as another do."

There were no further incidents, however, the remainder of the day passing peacefully enough.

Before settling down for the night the corporal had Dingy take a look at the sick man, and as he appeared satisfied, Donovan announced that as Stormy had given them no trouble since his first outburst they could presume he was all right again, in which case single guards would suffice for the night hours. Significant glances passed between Roberts and Scrounger, but they wisely held their tongues.

Kachindit was on duty during the early hours, squatting in the shadow of some trees, perfectly still as was his wont. When a faint noise, almost imperceptible amongst the buzzing of the mosquitoes, reached his keen ears. Only his eyes moved as he glanced round the sleeping figures. At first he could see nothing, but as he watched, a vague shape, darker than its surroundings, rose slightly from the ground, moving slowly toward one of the sleepers.

The hillman's fingers tightened on the shaft of his beloved hunting spear, but he made no other movement. The shadow had disappeared again as Kachindit quickly blinked his eyes to relieve the strain. There it was again! Rising so slowly that it almost grew out of the ground. The instant it reached its full height Kachindit moved with a swiftness born of muscular perfection, his spear flashing straight at the shadow. There was a sharp yelp, a frenzied scuffle and silence.

He had followed his spear and when the others shot into wakefulness at the noise, they saw him standing with his dah held ready.

"That you, Kachindit? Are you all right?" called Evans, scrambling to his feet. His bare foot touched the furry tail and leaping back he exclaimed, "What is it?" Everyone seemed to be talking at once now, anxious to find out what had happened. "Strike a light, somebody, Kachindit's got something here," he said loudly.

"A jackal," shuddered Chalky as he saw it lying at the foot of his bed. "What's it doing here?"

"Probably attracted by the smell of blood from your foot," suggested Dingy.

"Aye, they are scavengers, aren't they," agreed Donovan. "But for Kachindit here, he'd have had it off and eaten it by now," he laughed.

"Talking about eating, let's get a fire going. There's good meat here." Evans licked his lips hungrily as he spoke.

"Are they good to eat?" Chalky asked doubtfully.

"It's meat, ain't it," Scrounger replied. "Don't 'ave any if you don't want, though."

While some removed the skin from the warm body and cut it roughly into pieces, others got a roaring fire going, and soon they had it spitted on sticks and roasting. Unable to wait for it to cook thoroughly they grabbed at the hot meat, burning their fingers in the process, wolfing it down. Stormy had wakened at the noise they made and he, too, ate some. When their hunger had at last been abated they lay back yarning about how good it had been and recalled again other wonderful meals. Kachindit came in for his share of praise, and he grinned at them all amiably in reply. Before turning in again they put what little meat remained in one of their packs, arranging for a guard to be over it "in case his missus comes along to look for him" as Roberts put it.

Revitalized by the food and rest they resumed their journey shortly after dawn, but despite their new-found

enthusiasm for life things did not go well. Stormy was still far from fit, moving only very slowly even with help from the others. While everyone else fumed at the laggardly pace Chalky was thankful for the respite, for his leg was causing him considerable pain. He would not have been able to keep up had they moved at the normal rate. Moreover, it wasn't long after sun-up before they began to get griping pains as a result of their gluttonous feeding on empty stomachs. The pains became more severe as the time passed and they suffered from attacks of acute diarrhoea. By nightfall they were only a few miles nearer to the hills although they had been on the move all day.

When Donovan told parties off for water-carrying, fire-lighting and cooking, in preparation for supper, several of them demurred about eating, protesting that Chalky's doubts had been well founded, the meat of jackals was unfit for eating, pointing out their present plight to support their arguments. Donovan scoffed at them, maintaining that the diarrhoea was due to starvation and not the condition of the meat, but it was only when he threatened to leave anyone who was too weak to keep up that they finally consented to eat.

Wiping his greasy hands on his trouser legs, Rawnley chewed thoughtfully at a piece of tough meat for a moment or two, before breaking a long silence. "Wonder where Hoppy got to? He should have caught us up before now."

"He probably passed right by us long ago," replied Donovan. "The folds in the ground would hide us and the ground is so hard that we aren't leaving tracks. Anyway, we've enough to worry about without thinking of him. How's that leg of yours holding out, Chalky? Do you think you can keep up?"

"Just try leaving me behind."

"That's the spirit. Dingy will have another look at it

later, won't you, Dingy? How are you feeling now, Stormy?"

"Not too bad. Just a little weak yet, but no doubt I will be better to-morrow."

They lapsed into silence again, each busy with his own thoughts, until Roberts shifted some meat from one side of his mouth to the other and spat some juice into the fire.

"Fink I prefer snake meat or monkey to this. They was jus' like chicken, this stuff's like leaver."

"So long as it fills your belly that's all that matters," replied Evans. "You ought to think yourself lucky you've got it to eat. If Kachindit hadn't speared it just when he did, the jackals would most likely be eating us now instead of vice-versa."

"Yer right there, mite."

Stormy coughed awkwardly. "What exactly happened to me, Bob, I don't remember anything really, although I have a vague feeling of something strange happening, as if," he hesitated for a second, rubbing his fingers across his temple, "as if I had a bad dream."

"Dream! More like a flipping nightmare," chipped in Roberts, but stopped as Donovan threw him a dirty look.

"It was a touch of heat stroke, that's all. Blacked you out temporarily as it always does. You'll get over it soon, won't he, Dingy?"

"Yes, you will be as right as rain in a day or two," Dingy replied quickly, taking the bait. "These attacks always leave you a bit exhausted."

Roberts's remark had not gone unnoticed, however, and Stormy persisted with his questions. "Did I say anything strange?"

The question brought about an embarrassed silence. "Strange?" repeated Donovan. "No stranger than usual. We're all strange if it comes to a pinch."

"Yer right there, Corp. When we gets back 'ome they'll

say, 'Aw, don't worry abaht 'im, 'e's 'armless. Bin in India an' gorn a bit doolali tap.'"

"Did I mention anything about murder?" Stormy asked, silencing Roberts' chatter.

Donovan was a little annoyed at his persistence, tired of trying to find evasive answers. "O.K., so you blurted out some of your past, so what. We couldn't understand you half the time anyway, and it's no affair of ours. All we're concerned with is getting out of this mess."

"Mess is right, Bob. How long is it since we first entered that morass back there?" enquired Chalky. "It seems a lifetime. It's almost impossible to realise that we haven't always been in such straits."

"Ayc, you're right, but it's only four or five days ago since we had that last scrap with the Japs. First the swamp and then the lack of food have done us more harm in those few days than all the Japs could do. We'll be meeting the yellow devils again soon, no doubt, so we'll be able to pay 'em back for all the trouble they've caused us."

Chapter 9

STORMY was not to be put off by the change of subject. "Bob, I . . ."

"Look, Stormy," interrupted Donovan, "if you ask me any more questions I'll slug you."

"I wasn't going to do. I only wanted to tell you a story. I've never really told everything to anyone else, but I've had it on my mind for nine years. Nine years of self-torture they have been, unable to sleep for nights on end, haunted always by the thought that I killed them. God, it's been terrible." He hid his face in his hands, shuddering.

After a short lapse he continued, "Living as we have been these last few days, I feel closer to you chaps than I have ever done to anyone since it happened. I would like to get it off my mind in case anything happens to me. If I die and any of you do get out I would like you to go to my father and tell him the story as I am going to tell it to you now."

"Die. You're not going to die," said Donovan feebly.

Stormy ignored the interruption. "It broke my father's heart," he continued. "Our family has been in the Colonial Service for years, establishing a fine tradition. Father and Grandfather before him had been respected Colonial Administrators. I was brought up to carry on the tradition regardless of my own feelings in the matter. In fact it was unthought of that I should even contemplate any other career. As it happened I was a rather devil-may-care youth, not given to much serious thinking, and as the stage had been set I accepted my pre-ordained rôle willingly enough."

"I had at that time no ambition other than having a good time, which I proceeded to do. It was the one thing I knew how to do very well, rather too well, I'm afraid, for I began to get a notorious reputation, malicious tales getting back to Father."

"Having satisfied himself that they were well-founded, and in fairness to him I must agree that on the whole they were, he used his influence and secured an appointment for me as Assistant District Commissioner and in next to no time I was in Africa. Not only in Africa, but in the bush, far removed from the bright lights and gay young things whose temptation I had been unable to resist. Father had done his work well."

"The District Commissioner was the son of my father's closest friend. He was a few years older than I and a brilliant administrator. Already he was being spoken of as a future colonial governor. He could look forward to a

life of fame and great service, the path studded with honours. Everyone liked John from his own personal boy, his subjects, fellow administrators, right up to the hierarchy of the Colonial Office.

"My own career should have been brighter for his guidance, and I was the envy of the other juniors. Even I realised that here was my chance so I determined to take it and settle down to some serious work.

"I had been out a couple of months or so when John's wife and daughter arrived back from a visit home. I was up-country at the time, investigating a case of reported black magic. I arrived back at headquarters, dust-stained and travel-weary, my carriers singing of the things they were going to do when they were dismissed. She was leaning over the verandah rail as I approached. I gasped when I saw her for she was the most beautiful creature I had ever beheld. You can scorn the love-at-first-sight theory if you will, call it fascination, but believe me, as she turned, smiling a welcome at me, I realised that I adored her.

"'Doctor Livingstone, I presume.' The laugh rippled from her lips as sparkling water over the stones of a brook in some idyllic garden, bewitching me further. I stood there woodenly, spellbound by her loveliness. 'Do forgive my rudeness,' she apologised, mistaking my silence.

"John came out at the sound of her voice. 'Hello, young 'un, back already? May I present my wife Patricia,' he said introducing us. 'You look tired after your long trek. You may not believe it, darling,' he remarked, slipping his arm possessively round her shoulders, 'but our young friend here is quite a gay dog with the ladies, so I shall have to watch out.' I blushed hotly as I replied, 'Was a gay dog perhaps. You see before you a reformed character—a most industrious and conscientious servant of the Crown.' I bowed mockingly and we all laughed lightly.

"Then I met Janet. She left the pup she had been playing with, coming to stand in front of me, looking up with her big brown eyes. She was the image of her mother. 'Hello. Your face is dirty,' she said frankly. 'Don't you like washing either? I don't because the water always gurgles in my ears and I don't like that. Mummy says I have to get washed, though, because it will make me into a beautiful lady. I wish I were a man like you, then it wouldn't matter.'

"I laughed away Patricia's reproof saying, 'Your mummy's right. If washing will make you grow up as beautiful as she is, then if I were you I'd get washed as often as I could.' Patricia coloured slightly at my compliment. It was the only one I was ever to pay her for, to the best of my knowledge, I never gave any inkling of my feelings towards her.

"'Are you as old as my daddy?' asked Janet. When I told her not quite, she said, 'Neither am I. I'm only four. Will you come and play with me?' From then on we became great friends.

"Our territory covered a few hundred square miles. John and I were out in the bush for long periods, and I looked forward tremendously to my brief spells at headquarters in the company of Patricia and Janet. Those two altered my outlook on life completely. I no longer felt any desire to return to the bright lights.

"Even before Patricia came there was an undercurrent of unrest amongst the tribes, but we had been unable to get to the bottom of it. The warriors were sullen and resentful of our presence, keeping strangely silent.

"I stumbled on the cause of the trouble quite by accident some months later. I had gone to Chief N'gawa's village to sort out some 'mammy' trouble which had led to fighting. After the palaver was over I asked after the Chief's son, with whom I had become quite friendly. At

first old N'gawa refused to say where he was, but finally I managed to get it out of him that his son was dying as a result of a curse put on him by Kuliki, the malignant witch doctor of a neighbouring tribe.

"I rashly told N'gawa that I would go to see Kuliki to get the curse removed.

"Kuliki belonged to the Morambi tribe, ruled by Chief M'bula, a rascally old devil if ever there was one. The Chief's village lay a day's journey away by canoe. On the way there I cursed myself roundly for taking on the job, racking my brains for some way to induce Kuliki to remove the curse. He was a cunning old fox and would delight in airing his superiority over me in front of the tribe, for he knew that we suspected him of being at the root of the trouble.

"Night fell while we were still some distance off. Normally I would have halted, continuing the next morning, but the forthcoming interview had made me irritable so I determined to push on despite the darkness and the sage advice of Sergeant Hassan who was in charge of the six Hausa soldiers who accompanied me. Luckily the paddlers were good rivermen, not afraid of the water at night.

"There was something going on at M'bula's, for the drums had been beating at intervals throughout the day. With the darkness they increased in intensity, keeping up a rhythmic throbbing that seemed to work into the bloodstream, dulling the brain.

"The village lay on the right bank of the river. At its back door, so to speak, there ran a narrow tortuous stream which I had discovered some weeks before when I had lost my way. An insistent voice in my brain told me to take this stream and not the front door. The premonition of danger was so strong that I decided to take the advice of the little voice. When we came to 'The Place of the Three

Barren Women,' where three gaunt, leafless trees stretched their cold dead fingers to the sky from their lonely sand-bank, I made the paddlers edge into the bank until I came to the big rock which stood sentinel over the entrance of the stream. At first the paddlers refused to go on, but I was in no mood for such nonsense and threatened to shoot them if they didn't. Arriving at the track, we beached the canoes, leaving one Hausa on guard over the paddlers, then I proceeded to the village with Sergeant Hassan and the others.

"The tempo of the drumming had increased in ferocity. As we entered the village a great shout rang out from the warriors assembled in the hard-trodden dusty square in front of the Chief's hut. Had I been more experienced I would have known to expect trouble, but with the rashness born of ignorance I went on.

"Stepping into the clearing near the chief's hut I beheld an unforgettable sight. The warriors were massed in close ranks on three sides of the square, their tufted spears thumping the ground in unison as they shouted for blood, blood, blood! On the fourth side, irascible old M'bula sat on a huge wooden throne with arms of human skulls, while about him were gathered the village elders in their ceremonial robes of leopard skins. But it was the centre scene which caught one's attention. Kuliki danced fiendishly, his face hidden behind a fantastic mask, his necklace of lion teeth and girdle of monkey tails flying wildly as he leapt high in the air, screeching blood-chilling incantations, his sweat-lathered body gleaming in the firelight. The chief's eldest son, naked except for his warriors' plumed headdress, also danced with trance-like frenzy, his blood-flecked spear plunging again and again into the two tiny objects at his feet. Faster and faster they danced, the lines of warriors roaring encouragement as they swayed to the hypnotic rhythm of the drums.

" Petrified with horror I stood for a moment or two, my mind a complete blank. Suddenly something snapped in my brain. Shouting to Hassan to get the chief I leapt forward into that square of death and, drawing my mauser, shot dead the chief's son.

" At the sound of the shot there was a deadly silence, the drums ceased beating and the bewildered warriors were stunned by the unexpected events. Before the sound of the drums had died away I had grabbed Kuliki in an arm lock. Thrusting my pistol into his back I rushed him to the throne where Sergeant Hassan had got his bayonet at M'bula's throat while the other Hausas stood in a tight circle round about.

" With a roar the warriors surged forward as I yelled at M'bula, 'Keep them off or you die first.' Badly frightened, not yet able to comprehend what had taken place, he called out to them to halt. Fortunately for me they had no leaders and, seeing their chief and witch-doctor in our hands, had broken their spirit a little. They halted, unable to decide what to do.

" 'O men of the Morambi,' I shouted in the lull, 'Listen to what I have to say. You know me. I am a man of the Great King over the Water. The Great King is angry with the Morambi for this baby killing which you have done, for you have broken the oaths your fathers made, never to make human sacrifices. By his wisdom the Great King knew of this killing, although you had thought to keep it secret.' A sullen murmur broke out and they began to move forward again. 'O warriors,' I yelled, 'you have seen the magic of Kuliki.' A great shout of assent greeted the remark. 'But that is childish to the Great King's magic.' They growled threateningly, but I continued. 'So great is his magic that he made me appear before you although no man saw me coming because I could not be seen.' Gradually they were pushing back,

their superstitious minds accepting all I said. 'You had thought to kill me and release your chief and Kuliki, but by his magic the Great King has made it impossible for your spears to kill me.' As I spoke I replaced my pistol and, keeping a tight hold on Kuliki, drew from my pocket a dagger. 'Look you to this knife, O Morambi,' I shouted, plunging it again and again into my breast. They gasped when no blood spurted forth and I suffered no ill-effects. Terrified, the whites of their eyes bulging almost out of their heads, they broke and fled.

"In the general disorder which followed we made our escape from the village, taking the protesting M'bula and Kuliki along with us, reaching the canoes without mishap. Securely trussing up our prisoners we thrust them in the bottom of the canoes and away we went. The hullabalu from the village gave the badly scared paddlers all the encouragement they needed—we fairly shot along that stream, luckily avoiding the many snags.

"The paddlers were not the only ones who were frightened, for although events at the village had taken place so quickly as to leave me little time to think, as I sat in the canoe I began to shake violently when I realised what a narrow escape I had had. Luck was certainly on my side so far.

"You may be wondering about the knife business. Well on the way to the village I sat puzzling my brains as to how I could persuade Kuliki to remove his curse from N'gawa's son and I found myself absentmindedly playing with a dagger. It was one which young Janet had brought back from England because she wanted a hunting knife like her daddy, but, as you may have guessed, this one was a toy and had a retractable blade. I never carried a knife myself, but Janet had handed it to me just before I left, saying that I could then be 'a proper hunter like her daddy.' I toyed with it for some time before the thought occurred

to me that here might be the means of putting a little magic of my own over Kuliki.

"We had barely reached the main river again when the drumming resumed. Not the nerve-racking persistency of the dancing drums, but the deep, resonant notes of the talking drums, pounding their messages across the territory, relayed from drum to drum until we could feel rather than hear the drums in the far distance as they took up the theme. There was something threateningly urgent in their notes, but none of my men understood their meaning. Anxiously I urged the paddlers to further efforts.

"I realise, of course, that they were propelled by fear, but those paddlers were marvellous. As the Morambi had not given chase I decided to put in at N'gawa's village to give them a well-earned rest, intending to pick up another crew for the remainder of the journey. Sighting the village at last they flopped wearily over their paddles, allowing the canoes to drift slowly shorewards.

"I could see that something was wrong. All the men were gathered on the beach looking very sullen, brandishing spears and war clubs. I called out a greeting, but only an ugly murmur came in response. Tired and angry, I demanded that Chief N'gawa come forward. Once more I shouted the traditional greeting and asked him to explain the insolence of his warriors. 'My son is dead,' came the reply from the old chief. 'The people are angry with the white man.' Thumping their spears against shields the crowd set up a great shout. Realising that to land would mean almost certain death, I prodded the weary paddlers into action again. Slowly we drew away from the shore followed by several hastily flung spears.

"Looking back, I saw that a few of the hotter-headed warriors were setting out after us so, turning, I fired a few shots over their heads, causing them to dash back for land. Then faintly above the drumming I heard the familiar

chug-chug and rounding a bend almost shouted for joy when I saw the old launch approaching, bearing John and more soldiers.

"I had sent a message back to H.Q. when I left N'gawa's to go to M'bula's. It turned out that John, fearing for my safety, had immediately set out, arriving at a very propitious moment for me. As the launch was turned round I quickly apprised John of the events at M'bula's, asking his opinion of the whole business. He replied that Kuliki was undoubtedly at the bottom of the trouble, but that the secret sacrificial rites were apparently being practised by most of the other tribes in the territory and would take some stamping out."

"Stuffing wood into the fire until it seemed as if the boilers would burst under the pressure, we pushed the ancient craft along. Most of the villages we passed seemed deserted; occasional canoes which we met hastily made for shore on sighting us, but we were in too much of a hurry to stop to investigate. Anxious for the safety of those at headquarters, I suggested I should take some of the Hausas overland, for the river formed a great loop and it would take us at least another twenty-four hours to reach H.Q. John forbade me, however, saying that it was far too dangerous, for his spies had reported that war parties were abroad.

"The following morning the look-out called to us that a canoe was approaching fast. Taking out my binoculars I saw that it was Kisawi, my own boy who looked after me at headquarters. We slowed down, flinging him a ladder as we glided by. Flopping wearily on the deck he touched his head to John's feet, addressing him, 'O Lion, there is bad news. My cousin, who, as my Lord knows, is a sub-chief of the Neri tribe to which I belong, has sent me talk of a big war party of the Morambi which passed through the Neri country in the night and in great haste, not even stopping to kill as they passed through a small village.

As you know, O Lion, we are great enemies, and before the white men came there were many wars between our tribes.'

" 'Where is this war party going?' I blurted out, impatient at his rambling.

"Cowering back, he hesitated a little before confirming our worst fears. They were heading for H.Q.

"Chafing at the slowness of the launch but unable to do a thing about it, we spent the remainder of the journey almost in silence, each afraid to speak his thoughts, I suffering agonies of self-torture as I told myself repeatedly that my actions alone had put the two people I loved most in this world in such jeopardy.

"At first sight of headquarters we breathed a sigh of relief. The buildings were not gutted as we had imagined they would be; the flag still hung listlessly, outlined against a warm blue sky. Training our glasses on the scene, however, we realised there was a strange stillness about the place. As John and I jumped ashore and ran toward the living-quarters, shouting for Patricia and Janet, some vultures lumbered slowly into the air, squawking protestingly at the intrusion.

"There was no living soul in the place. We found the bodies of some of the servants and the few Hausas who had remained behind, speared or clubbed to death as they had stood up against the savage horde which had overwhelmed them. Patricia and little Jan had gone. Kidnapped!

" 'I'm going after them,' said John, grey with grief. 'I'll take the overland trail, it's quicker, and I'll take M'bula and Kuliki along. If all else fails I may be able to exchange them. I'll leave them with the Neri until I've made sure of Pat and Janet, so if I don't return make sure those two pay, won't you?' All his self-confidence and assurance had gone, he looked very tired. 'Send for more troops and give me five days before you make a move. I'll leave half the Hausas with you.'

"I pleaded with him to let me go in his stead, but he would not hear of it. I realised that it was his right and I had already bungled enough.

"I waited two days before my impatience got the better of me, then I sent Kisawi along to the Neri to see if they had any news. The information brought back only made matters worse, for John had not reached the Neri country, neither had the raiding Morambi returned that way.

"In view of John's instructions I was now in a quandary, but finally decided that as things were evidently not going according to plan I would take matters into my own hands. I felt much better having made my decision, for the inactivity was beginning to get on my nerves. The reinforcements had not yet arrived, so I despatched a runner with a note informing the officer-in-charge of the latest developments and my intentions.

"That done, I set about provisioning the launch and re-stocking the ammunition lockers. John had left me the Lewis gun which I mounted on the deck near the wheelhouse. Once the ashes had been raked out and the wood pile replenished, we waited only long enough to get a head of steam up and away we went. Apart from the crew there were eight Hausas and four 'boys.'

"I regretted having to take the long river route, but considered it far too risky to take the forest track as I was still mystified about John's disappearance.

"The mad tattoo of the tribal dancing drums commenced while we were still some way off and I feared I was already too late.

"Our arrival at M'bula's did not go unnoticed this time although there was not the customary assembly of village headmen to greet us, just a heavy, explosive silence.

"The Hausas felt it too, and when I ordered them ashore they rolled their eyes in fear, not one of them moving. Even Sergeant Hassan, a veteran soldier, was mortally

afraid. Despite all my threats he refused to go into the village. The drums had stopped beating but I could feel the eyes of many unseen watchers upon me as I jumped from the launch, telling the Hausas that I would go alone and leave such women as they behind for this was man's work.

"They looked most uncomfortable, but none joined me except, to my astonishment, Kisawi. Thumping his spear against his ox-hide shield he showed his white teeth in a wide grin, announcing in a loud and solemn voice, 'Lord, it is better that these women in white man's uniform remain here and leave fighting to the warriors, for it is said that they are dog-caters like the Morambi and therefore cousins.' The Sergeant leapt ashore at the insult and would surely have killed Kisawi but for my presence. 'Moreover,' continued the impish Kisawi, 'once the shadow of my Lord is removed, the Morambi dogs will descend on the canoe-that-eats-wood and kill all these soldier women.' Good for you, I thought, as the Hausas sheepishly came and joined us. It was a bad omen, though, and I realised that it would never have happened had John been in command.

"I sent a couple of Hausas back to the launch to man the Lewis gun, waiting until it had pulled a little way out before marching into the village at the head of my tiny and already half-beaten force.

"All the Morambi tribe had come in, even from outlying villages. The square at M'bula's was packed with the massed ranks of painted, silent warriors. M'bula himself sat leaning forward from his throne with Kuliki crouched down just in front. The sight terrified me, especially their silence, and it required all my self-control to prevent myself from turning tail and running for the launch, but I knew that to do so would invite a spear in my back. The Hausas hesitated, but as I continued to move forward, they quickly caught up and clustered round.

They must have had a superb faith in the white man's protection.

"Only Kisawi appeared unconcerned, striding purposefully by my side with just a hint of a swagger. Either he was drunk with elation at his victory over the soldiers or so utterly contemptuous of the hated Morambi that he had no fear of them.

"I faltered just for a split second when I saw my friends, Patricia and Janet spread-eagled and pegged to the ground, John bound to a ceremonial killing post. I thought at first they were all dead for I could plainly see the spear sticking in John's chest, but he lifted his head at my approach, his lips twitching as if to grin. Janet started to whimper softly when she saw me. It was the only sound in that village. Ignoring the Morambi I snatched a hunting knife from Kisawi's loin-cloth and severed the ropes binding Janet and Patricia. The latter smiled at me from behind the dusty mask which covered her face, starting to rub the circulation back into her cramped limbs while I walked over to John and released him. As I did so, I thrust a pistol into his pocket. He flopped to the ground as the bindings released his weight, his legs all rubbery. Kneeling, I cut a deep groove in the shaft of the spear, breaking it off, leaving the head sticking in his chest. Still no one spoke or made a move to stop me. I motioned to two of the soldiers to pick John up as I gathered young Jan in my arms. Without a glance at M'buli I started to walk back toward the launch. With every step I took I expected to hear a wild, terrifying yell and feel the searing pain of many spears, but there was just that strange silence, impregnated with horror.

"The warriors opened up their ranks at our approach. We passed through and continued to walk slowly toward the beach. I could see the muscles in the Hausas' legs quivering as they itched to break into a run, their faces, as they turned to look behind them, slack with fear, mouths

hanging limply open, eyes showing large and white in their sweat-shined faces. I wished now that I had left them but it was too late for wishing. Softly, so as not to break that magical silence, I called to them in their own tongue, 'Soldiers ! If you let your legs run, my little gun will speak to you of death.' For a second or two my words quietened them, but suddenly from the bushes on either side stepped hidden warriors. They made no move toward us, but their surprise appearance was too much for the Hausas, two or three broke and ran. My mauser was already in my hand and as I saw the first one move I fired. Without a cry he flung out his arms and fell as the heavy calibre bullet smashed open the back of his head.

"Even as I fired I saw the Morambi warriors move forward, howling triumphantly, and felt Patricia's fingers dig into my arm. Firing into the screaming mob I shouted, 'To the launch.' The two soldiers who had been carrying John dropped him and ran. Kisawi scooped him up in one arm, continuing to stab at our assailants with his spear held in his free hand.

" 'Sergeant,' I tried to yell above the noise, 'get your men together and try to prevent them getting between us and the launch.' The Lewis gun had opened up as soon as the firing started and I could see the Morambi on one side going down like grass beneath a scythe. Years of training brought Hassan to a halt. He was shouting to the others to come back when a well flung spear cut off his words, killing him instantly. "Into these bushes," I shouted to Patricia, pointing to where the warriors were thinnest as a result of the Lewis gun's activity. Next instant we were in amongst them, their stabbing spears darting at us as I worked my mauser with full effect. Kisawi had put John down and I could hear his pistol joining in the fray, while Kisawi fought two Morambi with the hatred of a ferocious, wounded tiger.

"We had almost crashed through when Patricia screamed 'John.' As she turned to run back to her husband who was being savagely attacked by several warriors, another one leapt at her, sinking his spear deep into her back. I still hear her scream night after night in my dreams, for it was the last thing I remember of that fight.

"When I came to it was dark. My face was pressed to the earth, a heavy weight holding me down. As I started to struggle Kisawi muttered, 'It is I, Lord. Lie still for the jackals are still about.' Relieved at the sound of his voice, I let my head fall forward again, noticing that the earth was sticky with the blood which had run from the wound in the back of my head where a knobkerrie had split it open.

"I must have lost consciousness again, for when Kisawi shook me into wakefulness the drums were beating in the village, the Morambi screaming exultantly. 'They dance. Come now,' he whispered in my ear.

"I remember little of that nightmare journey, but eventually we arrived at Kisawi's village where the witch doctor tended my wound which, surprisingly enough, soon healed sufficiently to enable me to proceed to H.Q. The Morambi had got there before me, however, this time burning the whole place down. I was furious at not finding any soldiers there, cursing the incompetent fools who were responsible, although I discovered later that they had sent a small force of Hausas under the command of a native sergeant, and when they arrived and saw the gutted headquarters they turned tail and headed back home as fast as their legs would carry them.

"Well, if I could expect no help from outside quarters I would settle the Morambi in my own way.

"The paramount chief of the Neri fell in with my idea at once, for the drought had been long and the young men were restive. A good fight would make them forget their stomachs. I had a little trouble persuading them

against holding the usual war dance but I wanted complete secrecy.

"Runners brought in the painted warriors from the widely scattered villages, all armed to the teeth with newly sharpened spears and heavy war clubs. As the hundreds of warriors assembled I began to be afraid of what I had started, but my hatred for the Morambi for the killing of my friends was so great that I determined to teach them a lesson.

"I had timed our arrival at M'bula's well. We were all in position for our attack just after dawn. It was a terrible massacre, for once I gave the signal my control had been lost. The Morambi had no chance to put up a fight, before their warriors had time to rub the sleep from their eyes the Neri were savagely hacking and clubbing them to death; men, women and children, it made no difference for they were in the grip of the blood lust. I kept well out of the way until it was all over, otherwise they would probably have killed me as well.

"It was from the few women whom the Neri took prisoner that I heard the fate of my friends. M'bula had planned to let us get almost to the launch before sending his warriors in to attack. When the fighting did start they streamed from the village, soon overpowering the luckless Hausas. While the Lewis gun was spraying the beach, hidden canoes shot out from the bank and the warriors swarmed aboard, killing all the occupants. Patricia, John and Janet were, thank goodness, all killed during the fighting, but their bodies were dragged to the village for the victory dance before being thrown to the dogs.

"I also learned that the Morambi raiding party had seen John and me return to H.Q., ambushing John as he set out to the Neri. Why they didn't attack me I will never fathom.

"I was rightly held to blame for the massacre, and at a

subsequent enquiry was asked to resign from the Colonial Service. Had it not been for my family's good name I would no doubt have been dismissed. Nevertheless, everyone knew that I had been kicked out in reality and, as I've said before, it broke my father's heart. He would have nothing more to do with me, even refusing to see me when I arrived home from Africa.

"I did what many men have done before me, took to drink. When the war came I shook my drunken stupor from me sufficiently to realise that it offered me a way out—I could get myself killed. You may wonder why it is that I am still alive. Well, believe me, it's not as easy to get oneself killed as it seems. First of all you have to get posted to the fighting front, and it's surprising how difficult that is in a modern army. Then when the opportunity to die presents itself you find yourself instinctively and unknowingly avoiding death with all the cunning of an animal. That's the way it has been with me and I've cursed many missed chances. It seems almost that Fate intends me to go on living for a long time yet, doing penance for my part in bringing about the deaths of those I worshipped."

The fire had died down now till only a dull red glow peeped here and there from the white ashes, but they had all been so enthralled by Stormy's tale that none of them had noticed the chill in the night air. Now, as he finished speaking, Evans shuddered as a shiver ran down his spine.

"Yore old man's an idiot, if yew arks me," said Roberts, being unable to keep silent any longer. "Yer did more'n I'd 'a done. I'd probably've scooted fer 'ome as soon as I saw them cannibals." A giggle sizzled explosively from between his lips as he thought about himself scooting for home.

"What happened to the chief and Kuliki?" asked the practical Evans.

"They both died by the hands of the Neri warriors,"

answered Stormy. "It was probably as well, for while we might have got Kuliki on the baby-killing charges it would have been difficult to have pinned anything definite on M'bula. I only regret that they didn't die by my hand."

"Do you really mean to say that you've been haunted by the thought that you were responsible for your friends' deaths, all these years?" queried Chalky. "From what you've just told us I should say you deserved a medal for trying so hard to save their lives let alone be responsible for them dying."

"I think I know the reason for it," suggested the corporal. "It's really the woman and youngster he feels so badly about because he was in love with this Patricia so madly."

"Oh la-la!" interrupted Roberts, rolling back to avoid the kick that Donovan launched at him.

"Go on, laugh. You youngsters don't know the power of love; you've only touched the fringe of it with your petting in the local park and cannoodling in dark shop doorways."

"Tell us about it, Corp," said Rawnley, putting on what was supposed to be a love-struck expression, but looking more like a demoniacal grimace on his stubble-covered, dusty face.

"I'll do more than that if you're not careful, I'll put all you unmarried men on half rations from now on," cracked back Donovan.

Pushing back his hat to scratch thoughtfully at his thick matted hair, Roberts asked, "Wot's 'alf of nofink, Corp?"

"As I was saying," Donovan continued, "Stormy here was in love with Patricia, but as he couldn't show her that love he showered it all on the youngster who gave him some back in return. You probably wouldn't be feeling so guilty now, Stormy, if you hadn't been in love with her, and I'll bet when you meet someone else and fall in love again the memory will fade away. Seeing that you told

us your story we'll be your jury, and I reckon we all agree that you're not to blame for their deaths. That right, lads?"

A chorus of "Ayes" came in reply

"Maybe you're right, Bob, but I doubt whether I'll ever forget her."

"That's what we all say between one love and the next, but time proves otherwise. I remember when I was keen on a girl before I met the wife. . . ."

"Subject normal," yawned Chalky. "I'm off to bed, I'm tired."

Chapter 10

It took them another two days to reach the foothills covered with uninviting scrub, and although Donovan realised that they were all-in he refused to halt for long because of the food situation.

It wasn't until it came to climbing the hills that they realised how weary they were. They had to hang on to the trees for support after every few yards, for their legs felt as though they would buckle under them.

"'Ow long d'you think it'll take us t'reach this pass, Corp?" asked the now emaciated Scrounger,

"Eh? Pass?" Donovan fumbled wearily to sort out his thoughts. "Dunno. Might miss it, t'gether. All these hills look alike, and when you go d' this stuff," indicating the thick undergrowth around you, "you can't see no further'n your nose."

That night they slept as they dropped, too tired even for the mosquitoes to worry them. As Bawnley, who had been detailed for first shift of the guard, also fell asleep, they were not disturbed until the first grey light of the false

dawn filtered slowly into their tree-bound haven. With it came a rumbling echo of explosions.

Kachindit awoke first and, fearing that one of the many nats or spirits he knew to inhabit the hills was angry at their presence, he awakened Evans who sat up to listen. "Mortars! Hey, Corp! Come on, all of you. D'you hear that? Mortars and not far off either," he shouted as they struggled to open their sleep-laden eyes and force their aching bodies to stand upright.

A much louder explosion vibrated through the hills.

"Guns," said Scrounger. "Big guns, too."

"Guns," echoed Rawnley incredulously. "But the columns don't have guns."

"So what, thick 'cad," said Scrounger scornfully, "the ruddy Japs do, don't they."

"It doesn't matter much to us who has 'em," stated Donovan. "All we're concerned with is finding where they are, 'cos there's bound to be some of our lads there. Even the Japs don't fire guns at nothing. Kachindit, you're better at climbing these damned hills than we are, so go on in front to see if you can spot anything, and be careful in case any Japan wallahs are about."

They came to a small stream of cool running water early in the afternoon so Donovan called a short halt. When they resumed their march Kachindit had barely left them on his scouting duties when a burst of machine-gun fire rattled through the trees. For a few seconds the shock of it brought them to a halt.

"Kachindit say!" Evans's voice rang with despair. "Quick, he's in trouble!" He ran off up the track as fast as his weary legs would allow him, followed immediately by the others.

Kachindit lay prostrate in the middle of the track. The Japs appeared to have been examining him and, on hearing the others running up, they had darted back to their

positions. Evans saw them disappearing into the trees as he reached Kachindit and turned him over.

The Japs went quickly into action, and as Donovan and the remainder of the section appeared they were greeted by a stream of bullets from the machine-gun, quickly diving for cover. At the same instant Evans leapt to his feet crouching like a wrestler seeking a hold, screaming above the noise of the firing, "You've killed him you stinking little rapers of women. Killed him!" Such a terrible sound he made that all firing ceased, the British momentarily stunned by his outburst, the Japs obviously frightened at the threat of death that it heralded, for one of them dropped his gun and started to run away from this madman who bore down upon him on the wings of the devil. Evans seemed to spring forward and, lunging wildly at the fleeing figure, sank his bayonet into his back.

Rawnley's automatic stuttered from over on the right as he sought to give covering fire, the sound helping to deaden the scream of the wounded Jap and Evans's cackling laughter as, quickly withdrawing the bayonet, he plunged it again into the Jap's neck and ran on.

Chalky got to his feet to stumble after his pal, but Stormy brought him down in a tackle. They rolled over and over as Chalky tried desperately to break away, but Evans was already in the thick of the fighting, jabbing with his bayonet and slashing wildly about him with his rifle butt.

Donovan shouted to the section to rush the position, but the fight was over before they had got halfway, for so devastating had been Evans's whirlwind attack that only two of the half dozen Japs were still on their feet. In breaking away, they turned to run, pursued by the either, apparition that was Evans, shouting dire threats he would do when he caught them. ered, believe

One of the Japs was not yet dead, though, for whipped me at the machine-gun, he sprayed bullets across !. Should

sending the British to earth again. Donovan sent Rawnley and Stormy on a flanking movement while he kept the Jap's head down, but it turned out to be the other way round for he showed a total disregard for their bullets, continuing to fire wildly.

"Stormy should be almost there now," thought Donovan, pressing his head down even further as a bullet whined off a nearby stone. The machine-gun ceased its chatter and, thinking that the Jap must be changing the belt, the corporal signalled his men forward. Creeping from tree to tree he was rather puzzled that the Jap had not opened fire again.

Stormy and Rawnley suddenly burst from cover, rushing in with wild yells which died in their throats for the Jap lay still, huddled over his gun. Prodding him with his bayonet, Stormy called out, "O.K., chaps, he's a good 'un, Evans got him after all."

"It beats me how he managed to fire it at all with that," observed Dingy, surveying the blood running out of a bad gash in the dead Jap's side.

"Aye, they're stickers are these guys. We'd better go and see what's keeping Evans. Chalky, you and Scrounger stay behind to bury Kachindit, we'll be back shortly. Have you got your entrenching tools?" Chalky proceeded to take his from his pack straps. "Where's the other one?"

"Hoppy had it last time I saw it, Corp," said Rawnley.

"Well you'll have to manage with your machete, Scrounger, taking turns to use the spade."

"Can I stay, Corp? Me muvver said as 'ow I 'adn't ter stay out in the rain," Roberts asked as heavy drops began to fall down from the leaves.

"Your mother didn't know you were going to be a soldier, did she? Grab your bondook and let's go."

"Kachindit's, there's rice in these packs," called Dingy, Japs appearing going through the Japs' belongings. "the other it, leave it," shouted Donovan as they made a

concerted rush at the food. "We'll get the grub and ammunition on the way back."

"Blow that for a tale. Some more of the devils might get here first," Scrounger replied, hunting through one of the packs.

"I guess he's right, Corp," concurred Dingy. "It's safest to get it now while it's still here."

While Dingy and he were sorting out the food and ammunition, Roberts handed a diary over to the corporal saying, "'Ere y'are, Corp, if y'ever learn this Jap lingo yer might get a good larf out've that some day."

Donovan pocketed it. "It might interest the intelligence officer when we get back, although how anyone can understand this scribble beats me."

When the others had finally disappeared along the track Scrounger and Chalky made their way toward the sprawled figure of their dead comrade.

"Lousy rotten country this," grumbled Scrounger, sliding a little on the muddy path. "It's either so blasted 'ot that it peels the skin off yer an' tha can't find any water, or else it's pourin' down cats and dogs."

"You're right there. Gosh, but it'll be good to get home again and see some snow for a change."

"Yeah, roll on the boat. Believe me, brother, when I gets back to Blighty wild 'orses wouldn't drag me out here again."

"Poor old Kachindit," said Chalky, straightening out the dead hillman. "He must've run slap bang into them. It's a darned shame really, for I don't suppose he had much idea what the war was about. Just hated the Japs instinctively. Come to think of it, I'm not sure I know either, but I still volunteered."

"Yer a mug, then. I wouldn't have volunteered, believe me, although they never gave me a chance, whipped me in the Militia afore the ruddy war even started. Should

'a' made all them dodderin' old politicians fight it out amongst themselves."

"This patch here'll do for a grave. It's close to the track so we won't have to carry him far. I wonder where Evans got to?" murmured Chalky, banging the short wooden handle of the entrenching tool into the head which comprised a pick and spade. "He certainly tore into the devils when he saw they'd killed Kachindit. Funny how those two became attached to each other so much."

"Lot o' baloney that, he's only a wog after all, an' all wogs is better dead. S'far's I'm concerned the Japs can 'ave India an' good luck to 'em."

"Don't talk through your hat. But for Kachindit we'd all've been dead long ago. Anyway, let's get on with it or they'll be back before we're through."

For some time they hacked away in silence, making little impression on the hard earth. Sticking his machete in the ground, Scrounger lay back. "Phew, it's hard work," he panted.

"Sure is," agreed Chalky, also resting. "I wish those Japs'd had some cigs. I could just do with one now."

Scrounger leant forward as an idea occurred to him. "We're a couple've mugs, we are. Here's us sweatin' our guts out digging, an' all we need to do is shove 'im behind some bushes and cover this spot wi' a few stones an' they'll never know the difference, 'cos we'll be moving on as soon as they gets back." He grinned with pride the more he thought about his bright idea, but Chalky wasn't having any.

"No wonder they call you Scrounger, you callous devil. You'd expect to be buried if you got killed, and what's good enough for you is good enough for Kachindit."

"Is that so, yer little runt, yer. I've a good mind to bash yer face in fer classin' me with a dirty wog."

"Come on, then, try it. You're just about my match.

You big blokes can't take it when it comes to going without food."

They both got to their feet as Chalky spoke, their tempers thoroughly aroused.

"We'll see about that," Scrounger snarled. "When I've finished wi' yer you'll be joining yer wog pal 'ere." He suddenly flung a clod of earth at Chalky and dived forward. As Chalky ducked to avoid it, Scrounger's head caught him in the stomach, bowling him over, gasping for breath. Scrounger tried to jump on his stomach with his bent knees, but Chalky managed to turn so that the full weight caught his side instead. As he turned his outflung arm hit the entrenching tool, sending a nervous shock right through him. Scrounger was punimelling his head as he instinctively grabbed the weapon, bringing it over with a resounding thud on to Scrounger's back.

With a cry of pain the big man rolled off and out of range. "Do that, would you, you little rat." Scrambling to his feet he snatched up his machete. "No one does that to Johnny Aston an' gets away with it. I'll chop you up so small they won't be able to bury yer with the wog after all."

As they circled each other warily Chalky taunted him, "Come on, you big fine soldier, you. Ran away when the Japs attacked the column, didn't you." He blocked the wildly swung machete on his entrenching tool, missing with a return blow at Scrounger's head. He could see that his adversary was working himself up into a rage over his words and for a moment felt a little frightened. Realising that he had already said too much to stop now, he continued, "Just think, you might still be with the column if you hadn't been so yeller." With a wild howl Scrounger rushed in again and as Chalky tried to nip out of the way his bad leg gave way, causing him to stumble. He felt a sharp stab of pain in his left shoulder as Scrounger brushed by, and, falling over his legs, went tumbling into a tree.

They were both on their feet again in a flash. "Nearly 'ad yer that time," grinned Scrounger evilly as he saw the blood running from the wound his machete had caused. "Next time'll be the finish." He laughed harshly as Chalky backed away. "Yer can't run away from me wi' that gammy leg o'yourn, so think again."

When he rushed in again Chalky was ready for him. Leaping backwards he swung his entrenching tool, hitting Scrounger on the forearm, the machete flying from his numbed fingers. As he did so, however, he tripped over Kachindit's body, falling on to his back. "Aah!" screamed Scrounger leaping for the machete as Chalky squirmed over on to his stomach, reaching for the fallen entrenching tool. Before he could get to his feet Scrounger had pounced, slashing madly at him. The first blow missed and sank into the body of Kachindit, but when he tried to roll out of distance another wild swing sent the machete ripping into his leg. Mad with pain and fear he lashed out, heaving upward at Scrounger's head, but missed. He screamed as the machete sank into his leg again, then as Scrounger pulled at it he brought his weapon round in a desperate savage arc, the pick crunching sickeningly into Scrounger's skull. A terrible grimace flashed across his face as he tried to stand, then he crumpled up like a rag doll, flopping forward on to Chalky, the blood spurting out from the wound in a thin stream.

For some time Chalky gazed, fascinated, at the flowing blood, the entrenching tool sliding slowly out from the jagged hole, pulled by its own weight. As it fell away and dropped to the ground the blood ran faster and, following it with his eyes, he saw it spreading over his legs, mingling with that from his own wounds. The sight made him violently sick.

Recovering somewhat, he tried to crawl away, but the weight of Scrounger's body pinned his legs down. He

turned and after a struggle managed to roll the dead man away. It was only when he watched the body fall limply to the ground that he realised he had killed Scrounger. Panic seized him at the thought and he felt a terrible desire to flee. He tried to stand, but his wounded leg doubled up under his weight and he sat down heavily. The effort made his leg bleed badly and he realised that he must stop somehow. Cutting away what remained of his trouser leg, he stuffed small pieces into the cuts, binding the rest tightly round his leg. Then he looked to the wound in his shoulder, but as it did not seem to be bleeding much he left it alone, feeling too tired to be bothered with it. He still could not stand, so commenced to crawl away, but had only gone a few yards when he fainted.

He was still unconscious when the others returned a few minutes later, appalled at the scene which greeted them.

"The devils," gasped Donovan, whose first thought was that it was the work of the Japs. "Kachindit killed, Evans disappears and now Chalky and Scrounger."

"Wait a minute," said Dingy, catching hold of his arm. "There's something strange here. If the Japs did it who bandaged Chalky's leg?"

Stormy rolled Chalky over to feel for his heart-beat. "He's still alive."

"Scrarnger ain't, an' 'e never will be again," called Roberts from lower down the slope. "Some burial party this; somebody's buried the entrenching tool in Scarnger's loaf."

"Eh? What's that?" asked Donovan, joining him. "Mmm! And by the looks of that machete he's the one who wounded Chalky."

"He's coming to, Bob," called Stormy. "Easy now, lad, you're all right. Give him a drink, somebody. Feeling better now?" he asked as Chalky put down the mug.

"Scrounger's . . ."

"Dead," finished Donovan. "Like to tell us about it now or later?"

"I'll tell you now. We were digging a grave like you told us when . . ." Chalky went on to relate the whole story.

"Well, he's had it coming to him for a long time," was Rawnley's opinion when Chalky had finished. "He's no loss, and I for one won't spill any tears over him."

"It still makes me a murderer, though," whispered Chalky pensively.

"Ooey," Robert snorted. "Yer don't fink we'd split on yer over him, d'yer? Anyway, it wus self-defiance or wotever they calls it."

"Robbo's right, Chalky. As far as we are concerned the Japs killed him and wounded you," Donovan assured him. "How do you feel about pushing on? The pass is only a mile or two away. There y'are, hear the mortars?" he asked as firing broke out close by. "We nearly walked into some Japs camped on a clearing. Those guys Evans killed seem to have been the only guard on this side. With a bit of luck we should be able to sneak past into our own lines."

Suddenly missing his friend, Chalky enquired, "Where's Don?"

"I'm afraid we didn't find him. He'd killed one of the Japs only a short way up the track but where he and the other got to is a mystery. From the looks of that camp it didn't seem as though they'd headed that way, for there was no undue activity. My guess is that the Jap took to the trees somewhere and Evans followed him. He may be back this way soon, but just in case they have him prisoner I'd sooner be out of here, because if he talks they'll send a patrol out hotfoot. I'm sorry to give you such bad news, Chalky, for you've had enough for to-day; but don't take

it to heart so, he'll probably be all right if I know Evans. Now come on, how about trying your leg again?"

Eventually, with the aid of a makeshift crutch, Chalky was able to stagger along, but the gashed muscles of his leg caused him great pain.

That night they dined royally off boiled rice but it was a very silent meal, for after such a disastrous day even Roberts had lost some of his exuberance. After the meal they turned in, rolled in their groundsheets, with their bush-hats over their faces to ward off the drenching rain, for the weather was as miserable as they.

By morning Chalky's wounded leg had stiffened and he was weak from loss of blood. "Leave me here and you push on. I'll only hold you back, and it's not fair as you're so near to getting out. Anyway, I guess I'm finished."

"Don't talk like that, cock," said Roberts, "Ole Robbo here'll help you along."

"It'll take you all your time to help yourself in these hills, Robbo, but thanks all the same. I'll be O.K. I'll wait for some Japs to come along and bump one or two of them off before they get me."

"Stop feeling sorry for each other, you two. You, Chalky, tuck your crutch under your arm and get moving."

"It's no good, Corp, my leg's gone. . . ."

"Don't talk tripe, it's just a bit stiff. By the time you've climbed a few hills you'll forget you ever had a leg. You think you're being a tough guy staying behind; well, you're wrong. We could all play little heroes and do that, but it takes more guts to live than die sometimes. Still, if you're not tough enough to try, you can ruddy well stay here and rot; we don't want any namby-pambies with us. I hope the damned Japs don't come along to give you the satisfaction of getting yourself killed. Get your packs on, you others," he finished, turning away.

"Not so fast, Mr. Blasted Corporal," hissed Chalky,

struggling to pull himself to his feet with the aid of a nearby tree. Rawnley made as if to help him but Donovan dug his elbow in his stomach. "You're not so tough either," continued Chalky angrily. "You're glad to be leaving me so that you can run like hell back to our side. Well, I'll not give you the chance now, but if I slow you down, don't blame me, it's your own fault for being so clever. Hand me that crutch, Stormy, and give us a hand on with my pack."

Once they had worked their way up to the ridge the climbing wasn't too bad. They were following a game trail, now disused and almost completely overgrown.

A thrill of excitement passed through them when from one point they caught their first glimpse of the pass and the object of the fighting, a newly constructed narrow-gauge railway. It was only visible for a short length as it passed over a patch of rocky ground, the jungle hiding the tell-tale rails for the most part. The mortar and small-arms fire sounded much louder, but except for an occasional puff of smoke, they could see nothing of the fighting.

"When do we start going down into the pass?" asked Dingy.

"I'm wondering whether we should at all," said Stormy. "Why not keep to the ridge as we are now; we may miss the fighting altogether and come up behind our own chaps?"

"That's hardly likely, Stormy," the corporal answered. "If we can use this track there's nothing to stop our chaps using it from the other side, and you can bet your life the Japs will have realised it. We've come to the most dangerous part of our journey. Frankly, I don't fancy it. That last duffy put the wind up me, for if Evans hadn't gone berserk over Kachindit's death and plunged into them so unexpectedly, those Japs would have beaten us easily; we're in no fit state for scrapping now. If we could only

think of some way to distract their attention we may manage to sneak through but the odds are against us."

"It will certainly be a damn shame for us not to succeed now after having come through so much," Stormy said thoughtfully.

As the others got up to move on again Chalky grinned at Donovan a little ruefully. "I'm saying it again, Corp," he announced quietly. "Why don't you buzz off and leave me in peace? You've just admitted that you'll be lucky to get through. With me to anchor you back you'll never do it. You don't need to worry about leaving me, either, because I've been having a word with Dingy and he says this leg will have to come off. You know, I've always said I'd rather die than be crippled. Then again, I'm not particular about getting out after killing Scrounger."

Just as quietly Donovan answered him, "You must have spent quite some time thinking up such good excuses, Chalky. Remember your pal, Culshaw? He was in a pretty bad way, wasn't he?" His voice rose slightly, "But you didn't let him die peacefully, did you? He'd have laid down and died many a time but for you nagging him along, telling him that while there's life there's hope. Well, the same goes for you. As for Dingy telling you that about your leg, forget it. He never was any good except at handing out M. and B. tablets and quinine. Why, the first Jap he saw he thought it was one of our lads with jaundice."

"I should hate to be your wife. She must bless this war if only to get away from your nagging." Chalky laughed away any offence his remark could cause as he staggered to his feet again.

The climbing wearied them more than they cared to admit, they had to halt frequently, especially for Chalky's benefit for in spite of Donovan's assurances, he was growing steadily weaker, barely able to stagger along even with their

help. His cavernous face had gone deathly pale, the hollows of his eyes and cheeks showing dark against his pallor.

Late in the afternoon they halted for a short rest, Dingy, who had a bad attack of dysentery, making a sudden dive off the track and downhill some way, into the bushes. He quickly returned, however, his finger pressed to his lips for silence.

"Too late again, Dingy?" enquired Roberts.

"There's a big Jap ammo dump down there," he whispered hoarsely. "I heard something creaking and went to have a look. The hill falls away suddenly like a cliff, and down below there were some bullock carts arriving, others were unloading ammunition."

"Calm down a bit, then," Donovan urged the excited Dingy. "What about Japs, did you see any?"

"Yes, there's a barracks down there as well, and a Jap guard with each bullock cart."

"You others stay here while Stormy and I have a look," said Donovan. Quietly they crept from tree to tree until, as Dingy had said, the hillside dropped steeply into a natural clearing dotted with trees. "Phew!" breathed Donovan, "There's some stuff down there. It looks like one of their main supply dumps."

"That's a newly made road those bullock carts have just taken," whispered Stormy, "so they couldn't have been using it as a dump for long. Hello! what's happening now?" he asked as several Japs ran from one of the huts, disappearing in the trees at the far side of the clearing. His question was soon answered for they reappeared shortly with a long line of coolies. Going to one of the piles of ammunition some of the coolies loaded boxes on to their heads while others slung canisters of mortar bombs on to bamboo poles. Heavily laden, they moved away, the Japs beating the laggards with sticks.

"Must be another track leading off there," said Donovan

as the whole party disappeared into the trees again. "I wonder what goes on, one party brings the ammo in, another carts it away, and why did those Japs come out so suddenly?"

"Maybe that explains something," ventured Stormy, pointing to some wires. "Somebody must have telephoned them for more ammo."

"Shush. What's that?"

"What's what?" asked Stormy. "I didn't hear anything."

"Thought I heard a scream for a minute. I must have been mistaken," Donovan shrugged. "We'd better be getting back to the others or they'll think we've fallen over. I'll bet our crowd would give their right arms to know about this."

Meanwhile up on the track Chalky was pumping Dingy about the dump. "Hey, Dingy, how steep is this hill?"

"I've told you, it's a sheer drop."

"Can't be straight down, surely. Are there are trees growing on the slope?"

"I didn't look very closely, but there are some as far as I remember."

"Blimey, did y'ear that?" Roberts butted in as a faint whistle reached their ears.

Dave Rawnley stopped killing red ants with his thumb to jump to his feet, listening. "I could have sworn that was a train whistle."

"Wot they doin' wiv a puffer 'ere? I bet they don't get many passengers comin' this way," chortled Roberts.

After a minute or so, hearing no repetition of the sound, they settled down again.

"Could a man climb down from tree to tree do you think?" Chalky persisted.

"I suppose so, at a pinch, but I wouldn't fancy it. Anyway, what are you worrying about it for?"

"I was just wondering. The information might come in handy for our chaps. Is it a big clearing and where are these Jap barracks? Are they under the cliff or on the other side?"

"On the far side. It's a bit difficult to explain. Here, I'll be able to show you better." Dingy proceeded to sketch the lay-out of the dump in the dust of the track.

Just as he had finished they heard the corporal and Stormy returning. Chalky quickly smoothed away the lines. "Thanks, fucker, that's very interesting," he said.

"'Ear the puffin' billy, Corp?" asked Roberts.

"The what?"

"S'right, Corp," said Rawnley. "While you were down there we heard a train whistle."

"Train whistle! By gad, that's it! Remember me asking if you'd heard it, Stormy? What are they doing with a train up here, though?"

"Well, it's like this, Corp. They bring leave parties back 'ere from the main front, an' when they sees 'ow bad the scrappin' is in the back area they're glad to get back to the front again fer a rest," suggested Roberts, and was rather disappointed when no one laughed.

"I think I've got it, Stormy," exclaimed Donovan. "Those Japs that rushed out of the barracks and got the coolies loaded up with ammo must have had a 'phone message that the train had arrived. It explains a lot more, too. The railway runs through this pass and our chaps are fighting at one end of it, so therefore no trains can get through, but Johnny Jap isn't to be beaten so easily. He runs a train from the south, another from the north, and where our chaps have made a gap he operates a shuttle service of bullock carts and coolies so that the ammo still gets to the front in spite of the columns. All they've done is to slow him up. Crafty little devils," he said, half admiringly.

"But if our chaps have stopped the pass up how do the bullock carts get through?" Stormy asked dubiously.

"Aye, that puzzles me a bit. The only thing I can think of is that our blokes don't know about the track which the bullock carts take. I wonder where it leads to?" The thought intrigued him for the remainder of the day.

Halting for the night, they ate a cold supper of the last of the rice which, fortunately, they had boiled that morning. Between mouthfuls Donovan told them that they would all have to take a turn at guard duties, reminding them that with luck it may be the last one they would have to do, for he hoped they would contact a column next day, or at least on the following day.

"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched," Rawnley reminded him. "We've got to get through the Japs yet, and we are too much like the 'Ten Little Nigger Boys' for my liking."

"I'll be number one then, mite," joked Roberts.

"Don't be so gloomy, Dave. We'll get through all right."

In view of his sickness they allowed Chalky to take the first turn, which was the easiest. Once the others had gone to sleep he became very industrious indeed. By the time he had finished what he was doing it was well past the time to waken Roberts for the next shift.

When he had pulled his boots on and joined him, still rubbing his sleepy eyes, Chalky handed him the explosive container. "When you wake the corp for the next turn give him this, will you, Robbo. I've carried it around all this time in the hope that it might be useful, but with this leg of mine it takes me all my time to drag myself along, let alone this stuff. I don't want to give it him myself because, after all the fuss I made back at the swamp, he'll realise he's got the laugh on me after all, and I couldn't face his sarcasm right now."

"Don't worry, cock, I'll tell 'im not ter be funny abaht it. Ain't it dark to-night?"

"Sure is. Well, have a good guard, Robbo. So-long."

"'Night, Chalky boy."

Chalky went over toward his sleeping place and lay down, but a few minutes later, when Roberts had settled down a little, he very stealthily wormed his way through the bushes until he came to the track again, some way above the camp. He listened for a moment, then with a low chuckle, tucked the bamboo crutch under his arm and hobbled off.

Some time later Roberts shook the corporal's shoulder until he received a mumbled acknowledgement, before returning to his guard post.

Donovan followed a short time later. "All quiet, Robbo? There's a bit of a nip in the air to-night," he said, rolling down the tattered sleeves of his shirt.

"There is that, an' it's a relief ar'er that perishin' 'eat. By the way, Chalky told me to give yer this. Said as 'ow 'e didn't want ter give it yer 'isself 'cause y'd mike some sarcastic remark, so I said I'd arsk yer not to."

Donovan took hold of the metal box. "So it finally got too much for him, eh? He's certainly carried this some miles. It's a pity he never got a chance to use it, it might have come in useful. Remember when we first got cut off, Robbo? We were going to smash the Jap Army up between us and freedom, but we finish up by barely being able to keep our feet moving." He balanced the box on his hand. "I'll bury the stuff first thing in the morning. It's surprising, it's not as heavy as I thbought it was. Here, feel it." Passing it across in the dark, he let go before Roberts had got a proper hold, the box falling to the ground with a faint clatter.

"Go easy, Corp, are yer tryin' ter blow us orl up?"

Fumbling around on the ground, Donovan's hand touched the box and, picking it up, the lid caught his

thumb as it fell back into position. "Damn thing's burst open an' it's all fallen out," he exclaimed as he felt inside. "Wait a sec., what's this? Here, Robbo, see if you can feel any of that explosive around. No? I thought not, that box was empty all along. Just hang on a bit while I see if he wants to buy a battleship. That'll teach him to play jokes in the middle of the night." He grinned as he thought of his little prank, but the grin was wiped from his face when he discovered that Chalky wasn't curled up asleep as he had expected, he just wasn't there at all in fact.

"Where's that paper that was in the box? Give it here. I'm just going under my groundsheet to strike a match."

"Hey, wo! abaht doin' yer bleedin' guard an' lettin' me go ter sleep?" Roberts called after the disappearing figure, grumbling quietly to himself when he received no reply.

Making a tent of his groundsheet, Donovan struck a match and read the words which sprawled haphazardly across the paper.

"Dear Corp,

You didn't kid me with your bullying you big ape. I knew all along you were only doing it to keep me going till we got out. Thanks, anyway. I know I've had my chips, so thought I might as well create that diversion you want to let you through, and go out the quick way myself at the same time. If all goes well, I'll blow the dump just before dawn. I've pinched one of the Jap grenades together with most of the parachute cord. Well, I'm off to make my peace with Scrounger now—if we're both going to the same place, that is. Don't be such a damn fool as to follow. Bye now, and good luck to you all,

Your old pal,
Chalky.

P.S. Ever tried writing in the dark?"

"Wot 'yer been doin'?" grouched Roberts when Donovan finally emerged from the groundsheet. "Fought y'd gorn ter sleep yer've bin so long."

Donovan couldn't answer for the tight lump in his throat.

"Are yer orlright, Corp?" persisted Roberts a trifle anxiously.

With an unmistakable catch in his voice the corporal replied, "Chalky's gone."

"Gorn! Gorn where?"

"To die. Die for us, and many others like us, but mainly for us."

"Die?" Donovan felt him get to his knees although he couldn't see him very clearly in the darkness. "'Wot the 'ell are y'on abaht? 'Oo sez Chalky's gonna die? Stop talkin' in riddles an' tell me wot yer know." Roberts sounded rattled.

"He's gone back to blow that ammo dump."

"Gawd's strewf!" Roberts flopped back again as the full import of the words hit him.

For a few minutes they sat there silently, Roberts's desire for sleep forgotten. Donovan was the first to break into their thoughts. "You know, Robbo, it's surprising what war does to you," his voice came softly over the cool night air. "We've come to accept violent death as an integral part of our lives. When Evans, Timber, Bill Harding and all the others went, yes, even Scrounger, we kinda shrugged our shoulders as if to say, 'Well, that's the luck of the game, fella,' and it didn't seem too bad to die that way. We even thought it was a nice way to go if it was quick, and hoped enviously that ours would be like that when it came. But somehow it's different when a chap writes a farewell letter then walks deliberately to his own death."

"I don't fink I could do that, Corp."

"Nor me."

"'Ave a good guard, Robbo,' he sez as e went off, an never a sign of wot 'e's goin' ter do. Fink we should go ar'er 'im?"

"No. Our job now is to take the chance he's offered us. We couldn't catch him up anyway, and it's a shame to spoil the glory of so brave a lad. We'll get a move on as soon as the bang goes, but there's a couple of hours or so yet, so you might as well get a little sleep."

Keyed up with excitement now that the final decision had been made, Chalky made good time in spite of the darkness and his dragging leg. When he came to where the track tumbled over a series of rocky steps, which he had had great difficulty in climbing, he knew that he was not far off. It was difficult to judge distances in the dark, however, and he rather underestimated things, spending some time wandering to and fro along the track, cursing himself inwardly for not taking into account the fact that there would be no moon. If he did not find what he sought soon he would funk the job; he could feel his nerve going now. With a last desperate resolve he hobbled further on, almost laughing out loud when his sound foot sent the bayonet slithering. As he picked it up and replaced it in his scabbard he wondered afresh that the others hadn't noticed him stick it in the earth as they left.

"Down to the left here. I'll have to be careful or I'll go crashing right over the edge. Should have asked Dingy how far down it was, only I didn't dare arouse his suspicions too much. Thank goodness I can see the darker outlines of the trees, though. It's farther than I thought. Surely I haven't made a mistake and worked too far to one side. Steady there, boy, hold on to that tree, you nearly wasn't then."

Backing a few paces, Chalky sat down. Taking the

pack from his back he took out the cord and grenade, hooking the latter to his belt. After checking the remaining items he replaced the pack and, leaving the crutch where it was, gently lowered himself down to the tree which he had grabbed to stop his fall. Then he tied the cord securely under his armpits, passed it round the tree and, taking the loose end, proceeded to tie it round his waist. That done, he ran a loop over either hand and moved slowly toward the drop, paying the cord out as he did so.

"My feet are over now. Here's hoping this cord is as strong as it's said to be. Gosh, that jolt hurt! I'd forgotten about the cord burning my hands.' Thank God for that, Another tree at last. I thought my arms would drop off with the strain. I must have dropped some way there, There's not much cord left. Better reel it in and start again."

Straddling the tree he untied the cord from his waist, coiling all the loose in. After passing it round his new tree he retied it round his waist, rubbed his hands together, spat on them, took another grip of the cord and lowered himself into space. He found that he could kick the cliff-side with his good foot, so he knew that he had passed the overhang.

Down and down he went, lowering himself from tree to tree, pausing every now and then to listen for the sound of sentries below, but could hear nothing for the buzzing in his ears and the thumping of his heart. Unexpectedly he hit the ground, his bad leg doubling under him, causing him to utter a faint cry of pain. Fearing that the Japs must have heard it and would soon be looking for him, he took the grenade from his belt, sitting with his back to the hillside defensively, but nothing happened.

Just as he was about to move he heard a faint shuffle in the dust as a sentry approached. Two of them to be exact, for he could hear them talking and laughing together softly. By their unhurried tread he knew that no alarm

had been given. Blessing his sun tan and dirt, which hid his whiteness, he sat still as they passed within a few feet of him, resisting the inclination to throw his grenade. He could afford to let the small fry get away. "It's a prowler guard anyway," he thought, "so they won't be back this way for some time."

When they had moved out of hearing he crawled forward until he came to a tarpaulin-covered stack. He wanted one more central to have any hope of destroying the whole dump, so he ignored it. It was difficult to decide just where the centre of the dump lay, not having seen it in daylight, but at last he considered he was far enough in to risk it. He had just dragged himself to his feet by the rope binding the tarpaulin when he heard the guard again so he hung on, pressing himself close to the stack, until they had passed. Cutting through the tarpaulin he saw boxes piled one on top of the other. Taking off his shirt to smother the noise he prised off a lid with his bayonet, cursing irritably when he discovered it to contain ball ammunition.

He judged dawn to be about an hour away which meant that he had to hurry if he was to get the job done before it was too light.

Reaching another stack, uncovered, his exploring hands told him they were mortar bombs. That was better, but still not what he really sought. Dimly he could discern the outline of a bush nearby and as Dingy had told him that most of the stuff was under trees he made his way over there. Breaking open one of the containers he chuckled gleefully when he felt explosives. Just what he wanted. Quickly now he set to work dragging one of the bottom boxes part way out. The operation seemed to him to cause quite a lot of noise but time was getting short and he was desperate. If they did catch him he could always drop the grenade in. His luck was in though, for he was able to pack some of his own explosive in and fix a short fuse

without interference. By the time he had finished he was bathed in perspiration, more from excitement than from his exertions.

Retracing his steps to the mortar bombs he set the remainder of his explosive, this time with a longer fuse for he wanted the other stack to go first.

At last all was ready, all he had to do was set a match to the fuses and it was good-bye. Good-bye ! Never before had the word held such finality. This was the moment he had been dreading and it had come at last. It did not seem such a good way out now as it had when the idea first occurred to him ; it was much easier to die naturally. There had been so many good things to enjoy in the past, but he would no longer be there to enjoy them. Probably the others could get out without this, it may even make things worse for them. No ! He thrust the thought from him resolutely. He had to go through with it, all his bridges were down behind—this was the only way out. He felt quieter in his mind as he took out the matches with steady fingers and got one ready to strike.

Thoughts flitted swiftly across his mind like phantom spirits : he saw his mother as he had last seen her when she had come to see him off at the station, the old shopping basket over one arm, her apron peeping out from beneath her coat. She would miss him more than anyone, it was going to be hard for her. " Sorry, Mum. Try not to worry too much." He sent the whispered message over the intervening miles as he struck the match under the cover of his shirt.

Swiftly he scrambled across to the explosive, biting his lip to ward off the faintness as the jolting of his wounded leg sent stabbing pains reaching up into his body. There, at last, and no time to spare either, for streaks of grey were already lighting the sky. " Curse these Indian matches, they break at the slightest touch. That's got it, only a

minute left now." The sweat stung his eyes as he pulled himself upright.

"Come on, you yellow swine," his voice shattered the silence as he grabbed for the grenade. "Here come the guards jabbering like a cart-load of monkeys. This way, you fools," he shouted. "Ready with the grenade, probably a seven-second fuse. One, two, three, four. Here you are, it's one of yours," he cried, flinging the grenade at the running figures.

Chapter 11

FIVE men, loaded ready for marching, waited silently in the bushes just off the track. They had waited thus for almost an hour. Just as it became light enough to silhouette the trees there was a brilliant flash followed by a tremendous explosion which rocked the ground about them, setting the silhouettes dancing madly and showering them with leaves. Jumping to their feet they stood awestruck as the thunderous outburst was repeated again and again, a dull orange glow lighting up the sky. When the noise had subsided sufficiently for them to pick out the sounds of individual explosions, Roberts said, "Well, there goes the dump. You've done it, Chalky boy."

"There goes Chalky as well," murmured Stormy. "I wish I could have done that."

"Chalky's all right now," the corporal reminded him. "No more pain from his leg. He did a good job, got the whole dump by the sound of it. Right on time, too. Come on, it's up to us now."

For some time after the explosions had ceased, everything seemed peaceful in the pass, but soon the mortar and

small-arms fire broke out again, gradually increasing in intensity.

"Sounds as though our blokes are attacking," remarked Stormy.

"They want their heads looking at if they don't take advantage of the big bang Chalky sent up," Donovan replied over his shoulder. "We're not far off now either, by the sound of the scrapping."

Rawnley came running back, waving to them to get off the track. Joining them as they hurried into hiding, he announced breathlessly, "Japs. Big patrol heading this way."

"Let 'em pass, boys," whispered Donovan as the Japs appeared, moving very fast, almost at a jog-trot. They watched through the shielding undergrowth as their enemies filed past, so close that had they wished they could have tripped them with their rifles.

"This is as far as we can go on this track," Rawnley told them when the Japs had gone. "They've got strong bunkers and machine-gun posts just farther on. If they hadn't been so busy looking the other way I'd have run straight into them."

"What do we do now, then?" asked Dinky Bell.

"Jump over 'em an' run like 'ell."

"Don't be so daft, Robbo. If you can't think of anything sensible to say then keep your mouth shut for a few minutes."

"What about that track about a quarter of a mile back, Bob? That seemed as though it led down to the floor of the Pass."

"I don't like back-tracking, Stormy, it's too dangerous. And all the tracks are likely to be guarded here."

"Yes, if they lead through to our lines, but that may only go to the bottom. If it finishes up behind the Japs they may not have put a guard on. Obviously we can't go this

way, so I suggest taking a risk and using that. 'As long as we go very carefully we may be all right, and once we get down we can leave the track and push through the trees.'

Thoughtfully, Donovan stroked his beard. "Mm. There doesn't seem to be much choice, does there? I think we'd better move leap-frog fashion from now on so that if we do bump them only one of us is likely to get caught. We'll start now, and seein' that I suggested it I'll go first."

It was slow work, but luckily they met no opposition. The track did finish behind Jap lines as Stormy had said it might. It led, in fact, straight to the Jap battle headquarters. Fortunately they had spotted the camp from some way up the track, leaving it for the trees before they got too close.

From a safe distance they watched the confused bustle of activity at the camp. Some soldiers were packing and stacking tin trunks while others set fire to papers. There was a continual coming and going of pack mule trains from farther back along the pass.

"Looks as though they're doin' a flit," suggested Roberts.

"They certainly seem panicky about something. Chalky caused some flap if he only knew it."

Rawnley glanced up. "Here come the planes. Now watch the fun," he cried as a formation of six dive-bombers appeared and Jap anti-aircraft guns came into action.

"Well there's the front, lads," indicated Stormy as the planes peeled off into their dives. "They're doing a close support attack."

Barely a mile away the planes were zooming down, strafing and low-level bombing. The rattle of their machine-guns plainly reached the ears of the section.

"Not far now, lads," laughed Donovan. "In a few hours we'll be having bully stew again, you mark my words." He felt more cheerful than he had done for a long time.

"Look out, one of 'em's heading this way," called

Rawnley as one of the returning aircraft came screaming down, almost standing on its nose. Instinctively they flattened to the earth and by the time they looked up again it was already streaking for home, followed by the "Crump ! Crump !" of its bombs.

"Look at 'em," cackled Roberts, almost doubled up with laughter as he pointed to the camp where the Japs were running in all directions. "Like a lot of ants when yer stab a fag end at 'em."

"Aye, we can afford to laugh, we're not down there," said Dingy.

"We probably soon will be, 'if we're not careful," Donovan replied somewhat curtly. "Come on, let's get a move on or that bully stew will be cold. We'll have to keep to the trees from now on, and if we get spotted run like hell, every man for himself. Good luck, lads."

"Good luck, Corp." "Won't be long now," they told each other.

Stormy walked up to Donovan, taking his hand in a firm grip. "Good luck to you, Bob. It's due to you that any of us have come through. I'd like to thank you on behalf of us all."

"Ach ! Away with you, man. No one man is responsible, Stormy. We've all pulled together, that's all," replied the embarrassed corporal.

"We've pulled together because of you, though. Anyway, the thanks remain."

After reaching the floor of the pass between the Jap headquarters and the front, they came across a thick belt of bamboo, an impenetrable mass of tough, spiky branches stretching right across their front. For some time they tried to force their way through, but at every step entwining branches barred the way.

"It's no use," called Donovan at last, "we'll have to go round."

When at last they did reach the limit of the bamboo they found themselves in much thinner country where, as Roberts put it, "Yer could drive a bus frew the trees." There was a track leading round the bamboo, but it was well trodden and they dare not take it for fear of meeting the Japs.

Several times they spotted the enemy troops before they themselves were seen, but it was a nerve-wracking journey.

They were so close to the fighting that they could at times hear the yells of the attacking Britishers, when Rawnley, over-excited, dashed forward, straight into a Japanese platoon position. With a wild cry of warning to the others he burst right through them before they could grasp the situation.

"Run for it, lads," shouted Donovan, realising that the last barrier was before them and their only hope of salvation lay in speed and surprise. In a bunch they crashed through the bewildered enemy after Rawnley.

After the initial shock the Japs quickly caught on. Screeching excitedly they came tearing after them, firing their rifles wildly.

Inspired by the all-powerful urge of self-preservation, the section ran blindly forward until, with a sharp cry, Donovan stumbled and fell. "Keep going, I'll get him," yelled Stormy loudly as they looked back and faltered. Running back, he heaved the crumpled body of his corporal over his shoulders and stumbled after the others. Burdened as he was, though, the Japs were too quick for him. A swinging rifle butt crashed into his skull, sending him reeling. As he dropped to his knees another blow rained on his head, knocking him unconscious.

He wasn't out for long, for when consciousness returned he was laid on the ground back in the enemy position and all around him they were firing rifles and machine-guns. "God, let them through," prayed Stormy, realising that the British must be attacking again.

He tried to sit up, but a Jap guard, whom he had not seen, kicked his head back, making the trees dance in front of his eyes. He must have passed out once more, for when next he opened his eyes the firing had ceased and a circle of Jap faces peered enquiringly into his.

"Awake are you, Stormy?"

He twisted round at the sound of the familiar voice, but the Japs quickly thrust him on to his back again. Turning his head he said, "Hello, Corp, you here too."

"Yeah. We ran 'em a pretty good race, didn't we? Another fifty yards or so and we'd have made it."

When Stormy started to speak again one of the guards stuck a bayonet at his throat. He guessed he wanted him to keep quiet, but decided to ignore the threat and made to push the bayonet away only to find that his hands were tied behind his back. Instead, he looked steadily into the Jap's eyes, daring him to carry out the threat, and muttered, "Nice fellers, Bob."

"Aye, they're a queer-looking lot. I wonder if the others got away?"

"I should think so or they would be here with us. Our boys will be attacking again soon and then we'll. . . ." He did not finish the sentence for the Jap guard, furious at having his bluff called, stamped his foot in his face.

When darkness came they were taken out of the line, Stormy being roughly pushed to his feet, Donovan on a stretcher. After a very rough journey along a jungle path they arrived at the Japanese headquarters which they had seen earlier in the day.

They were bundled into a dark, unlit tent and left alone, although Stormy could hear a guard prowling round occasionally, in between times sitting just outside the opening. When he had recovered his breath he whispered, "Psst! Do you think they intend leaving us here all night, Bob?" Only the sound of heavy breathing could

be heard. He called again, louder, but this only caused the guard to get up off his behind to shine a torch round the tent. After making sure they were still tied he withdrew again. The light had shown the still form of the corporal huddled near the far wall of the tent, his shirt soaked in blood. Stormy tried to roll over to him but stopped when he heard the guard talking to someone just outside.

A light shone in his face again, momentarily blinding him. In quite good English a lisping voice said softly, "Good evening, gentlemen. I twust you are enjoying your stay with us and not being too badly tweated?" There was no answer. "Youf do not feel like talking? Never mind, you pwobably will in the morning—I think."

The light flashed over to Donovan. "Your fwend is wounded I see." The Jap spoke quickly in his own tongue to someone outside and a soldier entered with a bucket of water which he flung over the corporal. Dazedly he opened his eyes only to close them again tightly in the glare of the torch. "Feeling better?" asked the voice. "Tell me, how did you come to be behind our lines?" On receiving no reply he nudged Stormy with the side of his foot gently. "You must learn to weeply when a Nipponese officer asks you a question. It will save you a lot of unpleasantness."

"We are prisoners of war and are only obliged to give our name, rank and number," said Stormy, speaking for the first time.

The Jap laughed slightly. "You English, will you never learn? It is the stock phwase which all pwisoners twot out like pawwots—at first."

There was a bit of a commotion outside, then someone poked his head in to speak to their interrogator. He seemed angry when he replied, then stamping out of the tent, joined the interrupter and walked quickly away, still chattering.

In darkness once more, Stormy called across, "How are you feeling, Bob? Where did they get you?"

"Machine-gun in the back." Donovan's voice came in a pained whisper. "Paralysed my legs. Those stretcher-bearers haven't passed their proficiency tests yet, I guess. Must have passed out when they tipped me up."

"That's tough, Bob."

They were silent for a short while before Stormy asked, "Do you think the firing is getting any closer?" Without waiting for a reply he went on. "I wonder why the English-speaking monkey disappeared so quickly? Something obviously upset him."

"Listen, Stormy, have you been searched?"

"Not that I am aware, but I've been out for some time. There's a lack of footballs around here so they used my head. Why do you ask?"

"I don't like that soft-speaking devil and I've still got that blasted Jap's diary in my shirt pocket."

"Hell's bells! We'll have to get rid of it somehow. Are your hands tied?"

"Yes, but if you can wriggle over to me I've got a razor blade in my bush-hat, just inside the leather band. Always kept it for snakes."

"What! to shave 'em?"

"No, you twirp, to treat their bites. If you can get my bush-hat, it's strapped round my neck, you might be able to cut these ropes."

"I'll try it, anyway."

Finally Stormy succeeded in getting the blade out, but found that he couldn't reach the rope on his own wrists.

"Blast. I'll have to free you first, Bob, then you can do the same for me." He wriggled closer until they were back to back. "Push your hands out a bit. Gosh, I'm sorry," he said as Donovan winced. "There you are now, it's through," he whispered as he felt the rope part.

Soon they were both free, but as Stormy was about to reach into Donovan's pocket he heard the guard get up, and saw the beam of his torch sweep the ground. Quickly he scrambled back to his old position and lay still.

After a cursory glance round the tent the Jap spat on the floor and went out. "Filthy pigs," muttered Donovan. "That's it. Here, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to bury it."

"Bury it be blowed. Now you're free you may as well make a break for it. That might be valuable to our side."

"But I can't leave you," protested Stormy. "These devils'll give you hell if they find I'm missing."

"Listen, Stormy, if that slimy snake finds the diary we're both for it, in fact, as things are going against them right now we'll get it in the neck anyhow. They'll probably make us pay for Chalky's work. Hush, he's coming back. Quick, lie doggo."

"He's having a cigarette, so he'll be all right for a while," said Stormy shortly, crawling over to Donovan.

"As I was saying," the corporal whispered in his ear, "there's no point in us both staying. Apart from the diary, something important occurred to me a short while back. So far our chaps seem to have concentrated their attack in the pass itself, and that bamboo is going to take some getting past. The Japs'll be able to hold 'em up indefinitely there. Now if they keep sufficient men in the pass to pin the Japs down and send a large force along the hill track that we used, they should be able to swamp their defences and the back door's open. They can take this place as easy as winking because we know the track leading down here isn't guarded. Once they've got this place, those at the front are in the bag."

"You've certainly got something there, Bob," Stormy told him admiringly.

"Sure I've got something. That's why you've got to get

through. "I can take anything these devils can dish out, yes and laugh at 'em too, if only you'll bring our boys in the back way to give them a beating."

"O.K., Bob, I'll do it, and there's only one thing can possibly prevent me from getting through."

"Oh, you'll be all right," the corporal assured him. "They're in such a flat spin here that if you walked into their officers' mess they wouldn't notice you. Now, I'll make some queer noises as though I'm dying and you hide behind the tent flap, and as soon as that Johnny pokes his head in to see what's going on, bash him hard. Then you take his clothes, stick your own in your pack and off you go. When you get near our own lines change your kit and make a break for it. His uniform will be a bit small for you, but they'll never notice a little thing like that in the dark."

"Are you sure you can't come too, Bob?"

"Not a hope. My back's hurting too much and I've no use at all in my legs. Don't mess about wasting any more time or you'll miss the boat. Right? Ugh! Baah!" Donovan rolled about, emitting the most appalling noises.

Sure enough the Jap's curiosity got the better of him. Shuffling slowly to his feet he came over to the tent, switching on his torch as he did so. As he bent down to enter, Stormy brought his clasped fists down in a wicked chop at the base of his skull and he collapsed without a murmur.

"Good work, Stormy. Quick, now, off with his clothes."

When he had re-dressed, Stormy dropped the tent flap, flicking on the torch for a second or two. "How do I look?" he asked.

Donovan sniggered. "You look a ruddy duck, mate, but you'll pass. Off you go now before this chap's relief

comes along. Go careful, Stormy, it won't be as easy as it sounds. Good luck."

For the second time that day they gripped hands firmly. "So long, Corp. I'd enjoy this much more if you were coming along, you know."

"I know that, pal. Before you go I'd like to ask you a favour. If anything happens to me and you get out go along and see the wife and youngster and give them all my love. Tell her I didn't die in vain, it will make it easier for her. Say I went out thinking of them, will you."

"Sure, Bob, sure I will, only you aren't going to die. Keep your chin up and I'll be back in no time at all, then we'll soon patch you up. Cheerio then, Bob, and the best of luck."

"So long, Stormy, and if you pull this off it will more than even things up for that African business. Now off you go."

Chapter 12

THE faint shuffle of Stormy's footsteps receded and Donovan shivered involuntarily as a tingle of fear chased up his spine. He suddenly felt very lonely.

The pain in his legs and back caused him to wince as he tried to ease himself over on to his stomach. His outstretched hand touched the inert figure of the guard and he recoiled in horror.

"I'm getting scared," he told himself. "I'd forgotten all about him for the moment. I wonder what the inhuman devils will do to me when they discover Stormy's gone?" He found himself recounting tales he had heard of their brutality toward prisoners, and tried to assure himself that

they were all prefabricated by a lot of braggarts. Instead, he tried to think about Stormy, but his mind repeatedly mirrored the horrible tales he had heard.

"Gosh, I wish I were dead," he muttered aloud, globules of perspiration trickling down his face and forming damp patches on his shirt collar. "That's it, the razor blade! Why didn't I think of it before? Where did I put it after setting Stormy free? Let's see, I was over there where the Jap is and Stormy crawled over to me. Did I just drop it or throw it aside?" The thoughts pounded away in his head as he searched frantically in the dust with his hands. So many thoughts were crowding his mind that it suddenly went blank. He shook his head to clear away the fuzziness, and the movement sent an indescribable shock of pain convulsing through his whole body so that he cried out in anguish. When the pain had subsided a little he fought desperately to reason coherently. "It must be somewhere by the Jap, but if it's under him I've had it. I couldn't possibly lift him to save my life, nor to take it." He grimaced at the thought.

Slowly he hunched himself forward by his elbows, gritting his teeth to fight away the dizziness threatening to close in on him. He could touch the Jap's body now, and forcing his fingers under the hard rib bones he tried to turn him over. He could get no leverage from his own pain-wracked body, however, and the Jap repeatedly flopped back again.

He was panting heavily with the exertion, and as the Jap's body slipped from his aching hands once more he cursed aloud, swinging a desperate punch at the Jap's back, only to send a further agonising pain up his back.

"Kritz!"

The sudden shouted order startled him, interrupting his self-pity.

"Yasmae!"

There followed a thud of rifle butts on the hard-trodden ground outside the tent, and a ray of torchlight flashed round as the raucous voice shouted what sounded like guttural commands. Other voices joined in and Donovan could hear above the shouting the soft tread of many rubber shoes pattering toward the tent.

He turned his head, trying to feign unconsciousness as the tent flap was thrust aside, the torch beam dancing madly round the tent walls and dust floor before coming to rest on the two bodies, the Jap's cold and still, Donovan's tensed and heaving.

For a long second there was a heavy silence, then the coarse jabbering broke out afresh, excited and stunned at the same time. Donovan itched to turn his head but dare not.

He did not have to wait long for the next move for a boot crashed sickeningly into his side. Even as the pain rocketed into his head, pounding against his temples, the voice spoke again, this time in broken English. "Inpu no ko ! Bastardo ! Ingerris pig ! Where udder one go-ka ?" The words hissed venomously and the writhing Donovan twitched his head round as if to ward off a blow, facing the speaker for the first time.

By the light of a hurricane lantern which one of the Japs held, he beheld a short, massively built human ape whose face radiated hate. The eyes, green flecked and bloodshot, stared at him unblinkingly like a snake's, the snarling lips revealing uneven, tobacco-stained teeth, fiercely clamped together.

The corporal clutched at the earth floor with his broken finger nails, recoiling from the sight.

"Where udder one go-ka ?" the Jap asked again, his hand resting on the handle of the two-handed sword which swung by his left side.

Donovan felt the words stick in his throat and he licked

his dry, flaky lips before he could speak. "Gone? Who?"

He saw the kick coming at his face but was unable to avoid it. The sledge-hammer blow burst inside his head, splitting into a thousand darting needles which chased each other round and round while his eyeballs buzzed and bobbed. Faintly, as if echoing from some vast distance, the voice spoke again. "Very stubborn-no. You no co-operate vid Dai Nippon. Very bad, bad. You spik-ki the trud when Nippon-jin ask question. Where udder Ingerris son of a pig go-ka?"

"Don't speak, oh God, don't let me speak. Stormy's got to get away. I must hold on at all costs," thought Donovan, his eyes tightly closed to keep out the evil which the Jap permeated. He heard a swish and a slight thud and, opening his eyes again saw the Jap's sword quivering in the ground an inch or so from his face.

"Buggero! You die. You tink Ingerris number one good, Nippon no good, eh? Tschk!" The hiss of hatred sizzled from his clenched teeth. "I say you buggero. You die slowly, ya, piece by piece." He swung the sword wildly over Donovan, barely skimming him, before plunging it into the earth again with a cry of "Tenno Heika banzai!" Turning, he cried, "Kare wo utte," and bellowing madly he smashed the flat of his sword at the corporal while two or three others belaboured him with rifle butts until a thwack on the side of the skull sent him into oblivion.

When he opened his eyes again he blinked at the strong electric light which shone in his face. As he grew accustomed to it he saw that he was lying on the floor of a long wooden hut, bare of all furniture except a bamboo stool on which sat the oily-smiling officer who had first interviewed Stormy and he. "So you have wecovered, my fwend," the Jap lisped, blowing a cloud of smoke about his face. "You must forgive the sojers for tweeting you a little wuff.

They do not have the gentle persuasiveness of the Kempeitai."

Donovan shuddered as he heard the name of the dreaded Japanese Military Police and the Jap laughed softly. "I see you have heard of us. You need not fear if you answer my questions. Cigawette?" He held out a gold case.

Anything to stall for time, thought the corporal. He made to reach for the case but discovered that his hands were bound. The Jap observed his surprise. "Oh, I am so sowwy. The sojers did not twust you, I am afwaid. Permit me." He lit a cigarette from the case and, getting up from the stool, held it to the corporal's lips. Donovan opened his lips to receive it when the Jap suddenly jabbed the glowing end into his cheek, grinding it down.

"You rotten dirty bastard," gasped Donovan.

The smile disappeared from the Jap's face as he hissed, "That was just to wemind you that we mean business. How did you get behind our lines?" He rapped the question out.

"Go to hell."

"This will be your hell, my fwend, if you wefuse to answer. I am a vewy patient man, but if you persist in being foolish my sergeant will have to give you a lesson in tongue-loosening. I am aware that it was your party which came to blow up our ammunition dump, and I must know how you got there without being caught."

The burn on Donovan's cheek was smarting and he felt in no mood to humour the Jap, so just glared at him malevolently.

The Jap's eyes narrowed and, clenching his mouth tightly to control his temper, he ground his cigarette butt into the floorboards with the heel of his leather jackboot before he spoke again, in soft measured tones which bore the silkiness of unbelievable cruelty. "Why do you persist in being so stubborn? The information I wequire cannot harm the

Bwytish, for the deed is done. I am not foolish enough to pwetend that you did not succeed."

"Then why worry your head about how we did it, if it was us that did it, and I'm not admitting it?" asked Donovan.

The Jap leaned forward, the light glinting on his well polished boots as he moved. Spreading his hands out pleadingly, he said in a friendly conversational tone, "In your army if something goes wong do they not ask how and why it did so, and punish those at fault? That is all we are twying to do. Now be sepsible and tell me, and I will see that you are taken to hospital to have your wounds attended to."

"You're slimy," thought Donovan. "You change your moods as quickly as a chameleon changes its colour. I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you—even in my present condition." Aloud he asked, "What exactly do you want me to tell you?"

An exasperated sigh pursed the Jap's lips and, as if talking to a rather dim-witted child, he went on, "Firstly, how did you get behind our lines, secondly, how did your people know about the dump, and lastly, how many were there of you?"

"God, my back hurts like blazes," thought Donovan, gazing up at the underside of the attap roof in pretended concentration. "I wonder what old "Oily-face" here will do next for I can't stall him much longer? Wish I knew what time it is. It's still dark so I don't think Stormy will be through yet. Must watch my step there."

"Well?" The question rasped out dangerously.

"Play dumb, Donovan. You're dying anyway, so you might as well die bravely like Chalky, Evans and the others." He shifted his gaze to look at the Jap. "Er . . . I was just trying to figure out what you mean," he hesitated.

"Liar! You are just playing for time. I will give you one more chance to speak."

He was simmering with rage and Donovan saw that he could play him no longer. "I can't stand any more pain," he cried inwardly, "I must tell. It can't do any harm now, the devil's right there, and it won't affect Stormy's chances. But I can't stand any more pain!"

Suddenly the Jap leapt to his feet, sending the stool crashing to the floor. Swinging his clenched fists in the air above his head he bellowed, "Speak! Buta no ko!" breaking into his native tongue to find a strong enough expletive.

"All right. I'll tell, I'll tell," cried the corporal.

"Yoroshii," exclaimed the Jap. "Good. I thought you would find your senses at last." Miraculously the oily smile had returned.

"I know nothing of the dump being blown. I heard the noise, of course, and wondered what it was." Donovan saw a fierce scowl wipe the smile from the Jap's face and hurried on. "It's true, I tell you. I led my section on a patrol and we got caught by daylight before we could return, so decided to make a run for it. Just an ordinary section patrol it was."

He lifted his bound hands to parry the kick but the toe of the jackboot glanced off, smashing into his temple, and for the second time that night he blacked out.

The diffused grey light of a new day was already picking out the unglazed window openings when he opened his eyes again. He felt extremely weak and his head throbbed painfully. For some moments he remained unmoved, gazing upward in incomprehensive silence until at last the full realisation of his predicament dawned on him. Raising his head from the hard floor to survey his surroundings he was assailed by an overpowering dizziness and his head dropped back with a thud.

At the sound, a figure slumped in a dark corner of the room shuffled to its feet and made toward him, yawning

loudly. Donovan had closed his eyes again to regain his equilibrium and the Jap guard—a squat dumpy figure, his trousers bagging out unnaturally above his knee-length puttees—rested on his rifle while he stared at the still figure of his prisoner for a second or two before pushing gently with his canvas-shod foot at the corporal's side. "Byoki?" he asked softly as Donovan looked up.

The Britisher continued to stare vacantly at the oscillating form which refused to be focused properly, and the guard repeated the question. "Byoki?"

Observing Donovan's failure to understand, he held his stomach and rolled his eyes to indicate sickness, grinning when Donovan nodded. Kneeling down he glanced toward the doorway before taking hold of the water bottle which hung from his belt. Uncorking it, he lifted the corporal's head to pour some of the tepid liquid between the parched lips. Donovan stared at him in amazement, then, feeling the water trickling from his open mouth and down his chin, he swallowed, gulping it down in great draughts until the guard removed the water bottle and wiped his sleeve across the corporal's mouth.

"Yoroshii?" he asked.

Donovan smiled wanly. "Thanks, pal," he murmured as he lay back relaxed.

Hearing approaching footsteps and voices the Jap placed a finger over his lips and doubled quickly to the door. He was just in time to spring to attention as the wooden steps creaked beneath the weight of some half dozen jack-booted officers.

The guard bowed respectfully, but the colonel and his entourage ignored him completely and strode over to the prisoner, one of the officers switching on the lights as he entered.

Squinting at them standing there a few feet away, Donovan saw "Oily-face" whispering to a rather pudgy

Jap. of medium height, dressed in a beribboned khaki bush-jacket with fancy lanyards slung through his right epaulette, their tasselled ends dangling from his breast pocket, and a white shirt collar, open at the neck, folded outside his jacket. Dun-coloured riding breeches tucked into highly polished jack-boots, a soft-peaked cloth cap placed squarely upon his shaven head completed his attire.

The scowl darkened on his round, clean-shaven face as he listened to "Oily-face." He looked extremely bad-tempered, and Donovan thought that his ugly mood had most likely been brought about by his being dragged out of his comfortable bed so early because of the recalcitrant prisoner. The thought was not a pleasant one.

When he spoke, in a slow guttural voice, it sounded as though he were addressing a dog. "Which unit you belong-go? You belong-go Shindits-ka?"

"Ask 'Oily-face' there," replied Donovan, glancing toward the Jap in question, "he thinks he knows. . . ." The remainder of the sentence was slapped viciously back into his teeth by "Oily-face" who had leapt forward in front of the bewildered colonel.

"What he say-ka?"

"Buta-no-ko," muttered "Oily-face," flushing hotly.

The colonel looked at him contemptuously, then, returning his gaze to the prisoner, he went on, "How you Shindit-ti sojers get behind lines and blow dump-ka?"

The pain in Donovan's back was excruciating; every little movement pulled his stiff, blood-soaked shirt away from the wounds, making him think of the time when, as a little boy, he had hurt his knee and his mother had cried as he screamed when the plaster was torn off. He could no longer feel his legs and was glad that he was dying, for he could not bear the thought of being a cripple. It occurred to him that he was no longer afraid to die, nor was he afraid of those yellow monkeys any more. He only

hoped the end would come quickly, without any more pain.

The colonel waited a moment or so for an answer then, without showing any emotion, he stepped forward and stamped his foot in his prisoner's face.

Donovan felt his lips burst before the weight of the boot broke his front teeth from the gums. He squirmed away as the pain from his bleeding mouth seared into his brain. Twisting his head sideways as the Jap lifted his foot he spluttered a little and spat out a mouthful of blood and teeth. "You brothel-bred little swine," he mouthed, the words sounding strange coming from his toothless, broken gums. He spat another mouthful of blood to the floorboards, keeping his head on one side to allow the blood to run out.

"Oily-face" had shouted an order in Japanese and a couple of big, tough, stupid-looking Japs appeared at the run, bowing awkwardly to the group of officers. "Kare wo utte," snapped "Oily-face," glancing sideways at the colonel for approval.

The two thugs acted swiftly, and before Donovan was really aware of their presence one of them grabbed his shoulders, heaving him into a sitting position. He screamed wildly at the pain in his back when the second Jap brought a wicked chop down on the bridge of his nose with the side of his hand, crunching the bone to splinters. The corporal's scream rose to a higher pitch as brilliant purple lights flashed before his eyes. He was sobbing uncontrollably when the Japs thrust him on to his back again, flinging his bound arms over his head so far that the movement lifted his back from the floorboards. The bigger of the two torturers leapt into the air and crashed down with all his weight on the corporal's bicep, his iron-shod heel-tips bursting open the flesh, tearing the muscle tissues to shreds.

The thugs stood back, smiling at their handiwork. The colonel waved them aside. "You no like-ka? Dat

nothink ! I give to mid-day you tell oro you know about Shindit-ti or you die very painful. Unnerstan', you Ingerris pig-ka ?" Donovan still moaned loudly, rolling his head from side to side. When he didn't reply the colonel clicked his teeth irritably and, turning abruptly on his heels, bounced out of the room importantly, his entourage clattering after him, almost falling over themselves to be nearest to him.

When they had gone, the tubby little guard leaned against the open door, relieved that they had left, for that brute of a colonel terrified him, and a little bewildered at the importance of his charge. He hadn't realised that the Englishman was important enough for the colonel to take such an interest in him. He broke out in a cold sweat as he thought about the narrow escape he had had by giving the prisoner a drink ; only by the merest fraction had he avoided detection. It must not happen again. He felt sorry for the Englishman—he was obviously dying—and would like to ease his last hours a little, but even so, he and his fellows had killed many Japanese soldiers at the dump, according to that braggart, Sergeant Tanika, and he had a wife and two young children waiting for his return home. Having so reasoned things out he slouched there, eyeing the helpless, groaning figure dispassionately, wishing his relief would come so that he could get some food and sleep.

Donovan's body was one big throbbing ache with several nerve centres of pain pulsating hotly, but at last, out of utter exhaustion, he fell into a fitful sleep.

He woke up groaning in pain as a couple of Japs bundled him carelessly on a stretcher. Chattering away to each other they carried him outside into the bright sunlight. When his eyes had accustomed themselves to the glare Donovan saw that he was being carried across an open area of dusty ground, bounded by camp buildings on one side and the jungle on the other.

The scene was vaguely familiar to him, but it was some seconds before he recalled watching the Jap barrack-square from the friendly cover of the trees on the hillside such an age ago it seemed. Ages and ages. In actual fact it was barely twenty-four hours ago, but life had held such promise then, now, here he was close to death, longing for it to come. The sounds of gunfire from the battle line reminded him of his friends, and he wondered whether they had all got through. Stormy should also have made it by this time, unless he had been killed in the attempt, and that was a better way out than this.

His reverie was broken by the Japs lifting the stretcher from their shoulders and placing it clumsily on the ground near one of the huts. The two of them stood nearby, carrying on with their conversation, ignoring Donovan altogether.

The flies didn't, though. They swarmed about him, settling blackly on the dried blood and buzzing angrily about his face. Wearily he lifted his roped hands to brush them away but they returned in an instant. The effort was so great that he closed his eyes and left them to it, occasionally blowing through his puffed lips when they tickled too much.

One of the stretcher-bearers uttered an abrupt exclamation and they froze to attention as the colonel with his hangers-on approached from one of the huts. Donovan smiled to himself when he saw him in his sun helmet; he looked a typical caricature of a Jap.

"Yasmae," shouted one of the officers when the colonel's party had halted, and the two stretcher-bearers stood at ease.

For some moment the officers stood in a group talking softly among themselves, their eyes on the prisoner.

"Oily-face" was the first to address him. "Well, have you decided to tell us the twoof?"

Donovan nodded.

"Good." The Jap smiled his oily smile, the sun flashing dazzlingly on a gold^o tooth-filling. "I hope you have learned your lesson not to lie to us." He turned beamingly to the colonel and they had a few words together before the latter stepped forward.

"How you get behind Nippon lines-ka?" he scowled.

Donovan's reply came as a faint whisper and the colonel shouted angrily, "Speak-ki. No hear. You speak-ki."

The corporal forced some saliva into his mouth and ran his tongue over his battered lips before trying again. "We came in from the swamps," he muttered slowly, still barely audible.

The colonel turned to speak crossly to one of the officers who stepped forward and allowed a thin trickle of water to pass between Donovan's parched lips.

"Now speak-ki, you pig. Unnerstan-ka?" snapped the little Jap.

"We crossed the swamps," the Englishman began again in a louder voice, "and made our way over here by following the bombing. Saw the kites some days ago."

"Kites? How you mean-ka?"

"Planes. Aeroplanes. We had very little food and came here hoping to contact our own lads again."

"Ya! Ya! Go on."

"That's about all there is to it. We had a brush with one of your sections."

"Brush?" interrupted the Jap again. "What brush?"

"I mean we bumped into one of your sections and had a fight. We killed them, but lost some of our men."

"How many Ingerris sojer-ka?"

"Eh? Oh, let's see, there was. . . ." He ran over their names mentally. "Nine. Just nine of us."

"How you reach-chi ammunition depot-ka?"

"Eh? Ammunition depot? You mean the dump? We didn't do that job. I told 'Oily' . . . told him," he

corrected himself quickly, "We didn't come in that way at all, we came along the valley and were trying to get back to our lines when I got hit."

They moved off a little way. He could see "Oily-face," who had been taking everything down in a little notebook, reading it over to them.

"You lie!" stormed the little colonel at last. "No can cross swamp. Nippon no cross swamp, Ingerris no cross swamp. Buggero!" He swung a savage kick at Donovan's side. "Very bad tell lie. Make-ki mowd speak-ki trud."

"I am telling the truth. We got into a bit of a fix on the other side and there were so many of your troops after us that we took to the swamp to escape."

The Jap aimed another kick at his ribs and Donovan winced loudly when it caught him. "Buta no ko! Why you tell big lie oro time?"

"What did you mean when you said you didn't come in that way, you came along the valley?" asked "Oily-face," butting in to read from his little book, smiling disarmingly. "How did you know the dump wasn't in the valley?" The sun caught his gold filling again as he grinned.

"Oh hell!" thought Donovan desperately, "I slipped up there. Trust that devil to catch on too."

"All right, all right. I'll come clean," he muttered, breathing heavily. "After we had that fight with your lot where the foothills begin we made our way along the hill track and by accident spotted the dump. One of the lads left in the night of his own accord and went back to blow the dump to give the remainder of us a chance to escape in the confusion."

"Liar! Will you never learn to tell us the twoof?" exploded "Oily-face." "You came here expwessly to do that job, did you not?"

"No! No I tell you. We didn't. It was entirely unrehearsed."

"What he say-ka?" asked the colonel, irritated because he was unable to follow the excited flow of conversation.

"Oily-face" took him aside and explained matters to him in Japanese. Donovan saw that the colonel was working himself into a rage as he listened.

"Now we make-ki you tell the trud," he thundered, thumping his clenched fist into his palm. "Koko-e-koi," he shouted to the stretcher-bearers who doubled over to him as if shot from a gun and bowed low. He gave them a few hurried orders and they ran off to do his bidding.

Next he turned to the little group of officers not so eager now to be near him. He was shouting at them angrily when his words were blotted out as a flight of low-flying fighter-bombers roared overhead. The colonel broke off in mid-sentence, a worried frown puckering his face as he turned to watch them. Without turning his head he said something to one of the young officers who ran into a nearby building.

The stretcher-bearers returned, one bearing a coil of rope, the other a rifle and bayonet. One of the officers motioned impatiently for them to stand aside and, casting puzzled glances at each other, one of them shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "There's no understanding these officers."

The war-planes were circling now, and as they peeled off one after the other on to the Japanese defences, their bombs sent a cascade of sound reverberating through the pass, furious and urgent in its ferocity.

A new roar added to the tumult as the British mortars belched forth in unison and the silent Japs glanced anxiously at each other as the ground trembled beneath their feet.

The young officer reappeared from the hut and had a few words with the colonel which seemed to reassure him for, disregarding the noise of the bombing and mortar

barrage, he turned to Donovan again. "Ingerris sojer oro die. Nippon number one."

Donovan knew by his tone that he was lying and he was glad. He was also puzzled. Surely they were not trying another frontal assault; they would never get through that bamboo. Why had they not put in an assault along the crest of the hill, or did it mean that Stormy had failed? One never knew, for the British could be very stupid at times and had probably ignored the information he had sent with Stormy. After all he was only a corporal, how could he understand matters of higher strategy?

One of the Japs came over and, sitting on his chest, twisted his arms so that the bound hands rested on the dusty earth, pressed tightly together as though in prayer. He could not see what was going on for the Jap on his chest, but he heard the cry "Banzai," and next moment uttered a terrible screech of agony as a bayonet was plunged through his hands.

The one sitting on him got up to dance about in praise of his comrade's marksmanship, while his friend puffed out his chest with pride amidst a circle of laughing officers who congratulated him warmly.

Through pain-blurred eyes the corporal saw that the bayonet had pierced his palms almost centrally; the attached rifle still quivering perpendicularly. His blood soaked into the dust turning it into a dirty brown wet patch which slowly crept from under his hands.

Eyes gleaming wetly with satisfaction, the Jap soldier swaggered across and released the rifle from the bayonet. Humming a little to himself he wrenched Donovan's hands away, dragging the bayonet out of the earth.

"God, please let me die," groaned Donovan, but they took no heed, being too occupied in observing the distance the bayonet point protruded. Having satisfied themselves on this point one of them held his hands across his knees

while the other hammered the bayonet into a central position with the rifle butt. When it was done the one who had held his hands turned and slapped Donovan hard across the face for struggling so much, then by his ankles and shoulders they carried him over to the hut where the officers had grouped themselves.

"Let me die. Please let me die," Donovan cried to them in anguish.

"If you had told us the two of this would not have happened," snapped "Oily-face," secretly pleased that the prisoner had not responded to more gentle persuasion. That was the worst about these army jobs out in the wilds, there was no scope for him. Now in the towns he had really got results.

"But it is the truth. I swear it. Please shoot me! I've told you all I know," pleaded Donovan.

"Oily-face" bent down to supervise the stretcher-bearers who were tying the rope to the bayonet on either side of his hands. The taller of the two then swarmed up the corner support to the verandah where he passed the rope over a cross-bar.

The colonel removed his sun helmet to mop his face with a large and colourful handkerchief. "This stop you tell big lies oroways."

The big Jap started to heave on the rope, but Donovan was heavier than he had thought and his companion had to go to his assistance before they could drag him off the ground. Their expectations were short-lived, however, for the prisoner had fainted.

The group of Japs were gazing disappointedly at the unconscious Englishman's body loosely swinging and twirling at the end of the tautly drawn rope, when a sudden outburst of mortar bombs on the hill track overlooking the valley made them jump visibly at its unexpectedness.

The big thug gaped open-mouthed, the rope sliding

through his slack fingers. Donovan crumpled into an unnatural heap in the dust and lay still.

"Oily-face" grasped weakly at the verandah rail, little trickles of sweat running unheeded down his ashen face, while the colonel, recovering swiftly from the initial shock, barked staccato orders to the officers and walked swiftly away, his sword dragging unceremoniously, leaving a faint channel across the square.

The Jap camp was hustling into life ; sleepy-eyed clerks and camp guards, still dopey from their mid-day siesta, tumbled, lost-looking, about the square only to be snapped up by the junior officers and N.C.O.s and pressed into service throwing up barricades.

The firing had ceased now and no one seemed certain about what had happened, or even if it had happened.

Opening his eyes, Donovan stared dazedly at the dust which felt soft and warm under his skin, and stirred slightly as he blinked his eyelids, the lashes thickly coated with a sandy fur. He felt a sharp pain where the bayonet dug into his ribs when he moved.

Wiping the salty sweat from his face, "Oily-face" noticed the movement and his fear turned to sudden, uncontrollable anger. Subconsciously his fear-ridden mind blamed the prisoner for the turn events had taken and he vowed to avenge himself on his helpless charge.

As he straightened up from the verandah the colonel drew up in his car, beckoning him over. "Oily-face" glanced at the hastily packed trunks bundled in the rear space and realised that the colonel was fleeing. The situation must be worse than he imagined. It was time he went also ; the Englishman could rot where he was.

He had not really been listening to what the little fool of a colonel was saying and a sharp slap across the face reminded him of the fact. He snapped to attention at the rebuff, his mouth sagging open in amazement as he

listened. Stay? Why should he stay, he wasn't a fighting man? The Englishman! He had to get rid of the Englishman's body so that his comrades would not see what they had done to him and take revenge on Nipponese soldiers!

The car shot forward, the rear mudguard brushing against his leg and spinning him round. He sat down and watched the car disappear before getting to his feet and reeling unsteadily toward the prisoner.

Chapter 13

STORMY hated leaving Donovan, it felt too much like running away. Gingerly he lifted the tent flap and peered out into the darkness. For a moment he hesitated, undecided whether to stay or not. Behind him the corporal groaned slightly as he moved and Stormy knew that he had to go, had to get through and bring help. "All clear, Bob," he whispered. "*Au voir.*"

"Bye, Stormy."

Feeling rather conspicuous in his newly acquired uniform, he straightened up, hurrying away from the tent. In spite of the darkness he could see that there were several larger tents and a few long bamboo huts in the immediate area, dotted about somewhat haphazardly. The latter he discovered to be barracks, for as he walked past one of the huts he saw that it was only a raised floor with a low-slung palm-frond roof, and as someone struck a match to light a cigarette the glare showed him several dark figures lying or squatting on the floor and the low murmur of voices reached his ears.

He ducked involuntarily as the match flared up, and

started to creep along the hard trodden path then, realising that such actions would only arouse suspicions, he drew himself upright, marching boldly on.

Rounding a bend in the track he saw several lighted buildings ahead and made toward them. "I must get the layout of this place fixed first," he told himself, "so that I can find the tent again."

So engrossed was he in noting his surroundings that he failed to hear the Japs approaching until they were almost on top of him when one of them coughed, startling him. Quickly stepping off the path he clutched the rifle in front of him and started to urinate. At the sound a torch flashed on and he paled with fear as the circle of light crept up his back. Instinctively he wanted to turn and run, but somehow resisted the temptation. The torch was turned off again without any questions being asked. Under cover of fumbling with his trousers he turned slightly to watch the two armed Japs continue with measured tread down the track. "Phew!" He shivered with relief. "That was a close call, old man. You will have to be more careful or you won't get very far."

He stood listening for a short while before continuing on his way. Drawing near to the lighted huts he left the track to make his way between two of the barrack huts and crossing an open area came to a cluster of bushes.

Edging his way round them, he passed at the rear of the lighted administrative buildings until he had reached what appeared to be the furthestmost one. "If my calculations are correct," he murmured, "those buildings front to the barrack square. Once across that I should be comparatively safe in the trees. We'll soon find out, anyway."

• For a further twenty yards or so he moved close to the bushes then stopped to listen. No unusual sound reached his ears so he crept stealthily forward until he was in line with the nearest building. The verandah was in darkness

but the light from the open windows patterned the ground in front. After satisfying himself that he was outside its sphere he moved forward again for some distance before turning to review the whole scene.

Now that he was viewing the camp from the same angle as before it was more easily identifiable. He soon picked out the headquarters building with its illuminated verandah, the guard marching slowly to and fro. As he watched several figures emerged from the far end of the building and formed up in front of it. Another figure came down the verandah steps carrying a hurricane lantern. He heard several orders shouted before they marched off. "God, they are the relief guard," he exclaimed as he watched them disappear round a corner. "They'll be on to me soon. Poor old Donovan. I wonder what they'll do to him?" Getting to his feet he turned his back on the Jap camp, swiftly walking away.

He reached the trees by the lower slopes of the ridge of hills without hearing any uproar from behind. He halted indecisively. Now which way? He could take the track up to the ridge, but then what? It may be possible to pass the Jap positions, which Rawnley had told them about, in the darkness, but once past them only the unknown lay ahead. On the other hand their break through the enemy lines this afternoon would have put them on their guard. Unless they were absolute imbeciles they would have taken steps to prevent any re-occurrence. At times, though, they were such stupid devils, these little monkeys, that it was possible to pull the same trick time after time without them catching on. Yes, it would have to be the front again, he decided, for to offset the dangers of that route the country was not unknown and he had a good idea of their positions.

Having thus decided he made his way back to the edge of the trees, for it was by now too dark for him to pick his way between them without making a lot of noise. He

could not afford to get lost—time was too precious. Unless he could reach the British positions before dawn he may have to hide a whole day, and help had got to reach Donovan before it was too late.

He started to run at a slow, loping pace, his boots making little or no sound in the thick dust. Soon he had crossed the open space and reached the trees again as they curved round across his front. For some time he followed the tree line, continually on the watch for the track which he knew must run between the headquarters and the front, but although he thought he had found it several times he was stumbling amongst the undergrowth after only a few yards. Filled with despair he groped his way out of the trees and ran on, cursing the blackness of the night which he felt was holding him back rather than aiding his escape.

He had almost circled the camp and was now heading the wrong way, but he still had not discovered the track. He was so tired and distressed that he was almost ready to give in when he heard a faint noise, like slapping, from just ahead. Instinctively he turned into the trees to hide. Gripping the Japanese rifle tightly, he tried to stifle the heaviness of his breathing while he listened. The sound puzzled him by its regularity; it was somehow familiar, but its source escaped him. He crawled snakily toward the sound, stopping every few feet to peer cautiously round a tree. After progressing a few yards in such fashion something glinted through the trees. Stormy stood up laughing weakly—water! No wonder the sound was familiar; he had listened for hours to the water slapping against the side of a canoe on his many long river journeys in Africa.

He made his way to the water's edge and lay still behind a large fern while he took stock of his surroundings. It was only a narrow stream, perhaps twenty to twenty-five feet across, heavily shaded by the verdant forest along

both banks, where the slow-running water lapped lazily at the soil.

Stormy assured himself that there were no Japs about before lowering himself into the stream which he discovered to be quite shallow near the bank. This stream, he decided, would be his road to freedom, provided it led in the right direction, and unless its source lay in the hills overlooking the pass, he saw no reason why it should not do so.

It proved to be a hard road, however, for the stony, moss-coated bed was hard and treacherous. It was, nevertheless, preferable to the jungle. Stormy felt easier in his mind as he splashed onward toward the British lines from whence an occasional burst of fire told of alert sentries.

The firing was the only means of judging distance, for the moon was not up and the stream twisted tortuously between the leafy lane of the jungle.

As he drew closer to the forward positions excitement at the thought of freedom mounted in his breast, and he had to exercise great control to prevent his excitement overcoming his caution. Every few yards he forced himself to stop to listen, bending down until his face almost touched the water as he stared ahead, seeking evidence of the enemy positions.

He felt as tight as a drumskin with the nervous tension, hardly noticing the coldness of the water until his legs became so numbed that they failed to react properly to his wishes. At last, with a shrug of resignation, Stormy made for the bank and with the help of the overhanging branches clambered out of the water, away from the slippery clay at the edge of the stream.

Sitting down with his back against a tree he removed his boots and socks, turning the latter inside out and shaking them to remove the grit which had accumulated in the toes. He then ran his hands up his legs to rub some circulation

into them and, as he did so, discovered several wet, pulpy leeches clinging to his flesh. Their sliminess was revolting to his touch, he snatched his hands away and drew down the ragged legs of his trousers. He wished he had some salt or a cigarette to remove them—but he had neither.

He shook involuntarily as a cold shiver coursed through his spine. Drawing on his wet socks and boots he stood up, stamping up and down until some feeling had returned to his feet.

He had just got back into the water, ready to resume his march, when a loud cry came from nearby, causing him to stiffen into immobility. Other voices joined the first until there was quite a babel of sound from upstream.

Stormy could see several silhouettes moving across the stream and a struggle appeared to be taking place in mid-stream. Presently someone appeared on the far bank carrying a storm lantern. By its swinging light he saw that the commotion was caused by a mule which had slipped, throwing off its loads.

The light from the lantern enabled the Japs to reload the animal. It also showed Stormy that a fighting column, fully equipped, was crossing the stream at a ford, for the water was no more than waist high. The lantern bearer made his way back to the bank when the mule had been reloaded, and Stormy saw him enter a small bamboo hut which he had not previously observed. He cursed his ill-luck, for he realised that his chances of passing the ford with the Japs on guard were very slim indeed, and he could not afford to waste time waiting for the sentry to go to sleep, if Jap sentries did fall asleep on duty, which he doubted.

As he crouched there with the cold water lapping round his knees, watching the enemy column crossing the ford, an idea occurred to him, but he thrust it aside as being too

dangerous. When no other feasible means of passing the Jap guard presented itself, however, he reconsidered it, deciding after a moment's hesitation to adopt it. It was an audacious plan, conceived of desperation, but Stormy considered that its very effrontery may carry it through, for he proposed no less a task than attaching himself to the enemy column.

As quickly and silently as possible he splashed his way toward the ford, hugging the bank the while. When he was about twenty-five yards away he left the stream, making his way through the trees, not without some difficulty for the undergrowth was extremely dense. Hidden roots and ferns threw him to the ground several times. What noise he made, however, must have been drowned by that the Japs made for there was no alarm.

Presently he was near enough to the track to hear the shuffling of numerous feet, the clink of metal against metal, the creak of straining leather and an occasional snort of disgust from the animals. He went to earth and wriggled slowly toward the track until he was able to identify each passing figure. He could have touched them by stretching out his hand had he been so inclined.

The fact that he had been able to get so close to the enemy and still remain undetected caused him considerable pleasure, adding to his confidence.

For seven or eight minutes he lay there while the Japs passed by, sometimes in groups, sometimes in twos, threes, or even singly.

At last all seemed quiet. Guessing that the tail of the column had passed him, Stormy got to his feet, flexing his stiff muscles as he stepped along the track after them.

At the ford a bunch of them stood waiting to cross so he stepped into the trees until the last man had entered the water before moving across himself.

He proceeded warily to avoid bumping the man in front

and was about half-way across when, to his horror, he heard someone splash into the water behind him. Glancing round he could just make out the dim outlines of another group of Japs.

"Great Scot!" he exclaimed inwardly, the blood pounding in his head, "they have got me sandwiched between them."

The Japs behind were pushing on fast and one of them shouted something to Stormy. Taking the remark to be an injunction to get a move on he quickened his pace without answering. He caught up those in front just as they reached the far side and could feel those behind closing in on him. A voice from the darkness startled him, but it was only the guard passing some remark for one of those following him uttered a rejoinder.

Stormy did not breathe freely again until they were well away from the stream, marching along a forest track four or five feet wide, hemmed in on either side by thick jungle which closed overhead to shut out the night sky.

The track was quite good and in spite of the darkness the Japs marched fast—far too fast for Stormy who had to force his weary legs to keep pace with the Jap in front; he dare not lag behind for fear of drawing attention to himself.

He was thankful for one thing, they kept a strict silence now that they had left the river. Their silence and the speed of the well-ordered march suggested that they were well-seasoned troops. Judging by the size of those around him Stormy guessed them to be Imperial Guards.

To keep his mind off his aching muscles he endeavoured to calculate the size of the column, but his brain was all mussed up and refused to concentrate so he gave up the task as hopeless. Presently the condition of the track deteriorated; jagged stumps protruded from the jungle floor, causing the marchers to stumble and to fall. Wispy branches sprang back to catch the unwary a stinging blow.

Stormy marvelled that the Japs still observed absolutely the forbearance from speech ; it seemed so stupid when their physical progress created so much noise.

He could tell by the feel of the feathery pattern of the leaves and the hard, shiny, tubular branches that they were passing through bamboo country, and the knowledge puzzled him. He remembered how the section had spent considerable time the previous afternoon trying to find a way through an impenetrable belt of bamboo which they had encountered and had eventually discovered quite a fair track, well used, which led to the front. But they had not come across the stream ; furthermore, the track led not through the bamboo but round it.

The place was alive with mosquitoes. He lifted his hand to scratch his face where they had burrowed into his beard and set up an irritation with their bites. God, his beard ! His fingers clutched at the matted hairs on his face as he stopped dead in his tracks, stunned by the shock of his discovery. He had forgotten about his beard. He had never heard of a Jap wearing one, and knew that as soon as it grew light enough to shade their dim forms with varying degrees of greyness his masquerade was over.

A Jap bumped into him sending him jolting forward. Automatically his legs continued to move, picking their way over the broken ground whilst his eyes sought feverishly for an avenue of escape which he knew was not there.

"How long to dawn ?" he asked himself over and over again until the theme was drumming through his head with each step forward. "How long to dawn ?" The question became an obsession which drove out all other thoughts as he stumbled along in the darkness.

At last they were through ! Just when they left the bamboo he could not tell ; he had been so preoccupied with the fear that dawn would overtake them that he had

failed to notice the fact. Only when the column halted did he realise that they were in a small glade with a few timid stars peering down through the darkness. The sight of them cheered him tremendously ; he felt freer already.

Harsh, low voices were calling out now and those around him set off toward the sound at a run. He doubled after them to find himself in a queue near the assembled mules which he could hear blowing down their nostrils, occasionally pawing impatiently at the ground.

The queue was moving now, presently he felt something hard pushed at his chest. Grabbing it with both hands he prepared to move on as the others had done when the one who had handed it to him uttered a sharp ejaculation and, stepping forward, slapped him hard across the side of the head. "What . . ." began Stormy, then quickly stifled the remainder of the sentence, vexed at his own impulsiveness.

Fortunately the Jap was talking at the same time, apparently not hearing him. Pushing something else into his arms he gave Stormy a shove.

Joining the group of Japs, he felt that they were staring at him so bent over to examine his new burden. "If this goes on much longer," he thought, "I'll die of heart failure."

A thin whistle of surprise escaped him as he found himself in possession of a light machine-gun plus several magazines of ammunition. He did not have time to dwell upon his prize, however, for they were forming up again, minus the animal transport which he could hear moving off in the opposite direction.

Almost immediately he was faced by another ticklish situation for the Jap in front turned and whispered something to him, which, not understanding what was said, he had no choice but to ignore. In an attempt to cover up he made a pretence of dropping one of the ammunition magazines. As he bent to retrieve it the Jap whispered

again, giving him a push which sent him on to his backside. In the meantime the message had been picked up by those following him. Gathering up the magazine Stormy started off after the others.

As he marched his fingers roamed over the gun. "Just let me get the hang of this thing," he muttered inwardly but nonetheless angrily, "and it just needs one more push from you monkeys for me to blow you to pieces."

For some considerable time he had heard no sound of fighting but shortly there was a prolonged burst of machine-gun fire, close, very close, and slightly to the right. As he heard it he felt the tenseness gripping him again. Forcing one of the magazines into the gun he thrust the remainder into his belt, feeling ready for whatever may come.

But why had the Japs sent the mules back, for the track was no worse than previously? In fact it was better for there was not that encompassing bamboo to force them inexorably along the dirt rut.

The gun cradled in his arms grew heavier as they marched on, taking an unaccountable time to reach the front which had seemed so near.

The reason for the dismissal of the animals soon became clear when they left the easy-going valley track to push their way upward through virgin undergrowth, past jagged rocks that had not hitherto felt the hand of man. At times they crawled for long stretches along tunnels about which there was an unpleasant animal smell. Stormy surmised that they were wild boar runs. He felt a certain sympathy for the boars!

What did it all add up to, this secret march? Had the Japs gone crazy to use such a tortuous route behind their own lines? Behind their own lines! No, by Gad! They were neither crazy nor behind their own lines—they were behind the British!

He saw it all now, the reason for their strict silence;

the sending back of the animals ; the use of this secret path. It was so plain that he could kick himself for not seeing it before. The Japs were moving in to try to break the British stranglehold on their communications. A burst of firing from the rear confirmed his conjecture.

" Well, it's all right by me, you yellow devils, you've delivered me to the British," Stormy thought. He would drop out at the first opportunity and make for the British lines when he could give the warning of the attack and get help for Donovan.

It was so easy. Too easy his common sense told him. He could drop out all right, but then what ? He would be stuck in the jungle with no proper idea of the British positions nor of the situation of the tracks which may lead there. To force his way through the jungle was unthinkable.

Still, why should he worry ? He had not come to fight their war for them, he had come to get aid for Donovan. Yes, he would let the Japs pass, then hide until daylight when he should be able to reach his own side.

Thinking of Donovan again troubled him. He wondered what the corporal would have done in such circumstances, but there was really no need, for he knew what Donovan would do. To keep faith with the corporal he knew what he himself must do.

They were emerging into the valley again now, creeping stealthily along a track through thinning forest. Hardly noticeably, a faint grey light was creeping in ; the beginning of a new day of sweat and heat from the burning sun, the chattering of monkeys from the tree-tops, the noises of myriads of insects which formed a natural background to the jungle—the beginning of a new day of death.

The trees gave way to a stretch of paddy-fields, uncultivated now, the bunds falling into disrepair. The sudden cry of a disturbed jungle-fowl broke the silence. It also galvanised the Japs into action for they broke away

in sections to make for pre-arranged positions. Stormy smiled grimly as he went with them, "You crafty so-and-so's, you fooled me then."

Dropping another magazine he bent down, allowing the Japs to pass him before heading back toward the trees. In his haste he did not see the ditch until he fell in it, finding himself in a foot or so of evil-smelling water. He was about to heave himself out when, looking across the paddy, he saw, some two or three hundred yards away, the dim shapes of Japs. Dawn was here! With a slight shrug of his shoulders he settled himself down, looking to the gun and his rifle.

From the shelter of the ditch he watched as the greyness quickly gave way to pink, then orange and finally the full day blazed forth gloriously. He was wondering whether it would be the last sunrise he would see when the call of the jungle-fowl brought him back to realities in time to see the Japs rise in a silent wave, moving forward away from him.

He felt no compunction as he squeezed the trigger, in fact he was smiling slightly. As the bullets drove into their backs his smile widened—he felt happy, really happy.

Quickly discarding the empty magazine he thrust another into place and fired a long burst at the confused Japs before ducking down to run farther along the ditch. They had gone to earth by the time he peeped over again but he saw about a dozen of them start to crawl towards the ditch.

He heard a whistle blowing from somewhere beyond the Japs and knew that the British had got the warning. The enemy knew it too and realised that the initiative was fast slipping from their grasp. They had to move fast if they were to regain it.

When they started to charge he fired another long burst at them, spraying the bullets over as wide an arc as possible, dropping several of the Japs before they could really get moving. The party creeping toward the ditch turned as

the gun spluttered from a new direction. Three of them jumped to their feet running toward him. He fired a few more rounds at the main body before swivelling round to meet the running Japs. The gun fired a few rounds then stopped. Yanking back the bolt he tried again, but there was only a metallic click, the magazine was empty.

The three running Japs were in their comrades' line of fire, preventing them from opening fire. When they saw Stormy fumbling with a new magazine they shouted excitedly, redoubling their pace. They were almost upon him before the new magazine clicked into place, firing their rifles from the hips. He felt a sharp tug at his left sleeve as he stood up to fire at them and knew he had been wounded but forgot all about it in the excitement of the next few hectic moments.

The first one was so close to him that he saw the red spurts of blood as his bullets perforated the Jap's chest. He sidestepped quickly to avoid the falling body as the Jap's momentum hurtled him into the ditch like a puppet whose string had broken.

A second Jap had gone down with his first burst of fire, while the remaining one was trying to raise himself up sufficiently to hurl a grenade. Another short burst from the machine-gun and he, too, fell dead, the grenade still clutched in his lifeless fingers.

The main body were away now out of his range, so, gathering up the gun again he ran along the ditch toward the shelter of the trees, a few frustrated shots from the Jap patrol whistling harmlessly over his head. As he ran he could hear a continuous outburst of fire-arms where the Jap assault was meeting the fury of the British column.

Emerging from the ditch he ran a few paces into the trees, turning to fire at his pursuers. Flinging the now empty gun aside he made off into the forest, heading for the fighting and the British.

The Japs were not to be so easily thrown off, however. He had barely slowed to a walking pace, the breath wheezing from his strained lungs, when a bullet ricocheted from a tree, spattering him with small pieces of bark. Automatically he sprang to one side, starting to run again, weaving from tree to tree, as more wild shots sought him out.

His rifle was slung round his back, but he dared not stop to free it. Run, run! His lungs hurt as he forced the breath into them, and a black mist closed before his eyes, but he must run, he must not fail now, not at this stage.

On and on he staggered, ignoring the branches which tore his clothes and flesh, oblivious to everything except his promise to Donovan to get through at all costs. Several times his legs buckled under him but he forced himself to his feet again. "Run!" he ordered them mentally, and miraculously the battered body rose, tottering on slowly and dazedly, but still moving, until, inevitably, the brain switched off the torture. Stormy collapsed amongst a clump of tree ferns, snapping some of them as he fell.

How long he was unconscious he did not know, but when he came to the forest was still damp from the night dew, still reasonably cool. For some moments he lay bewilderedly still, but as the memory surged through him he made to struggle upright, wincing as his weight rested on his stiffening left arm where the blood was beginning to congeal on his shirt sleeve. As he staggered forward the realisation came to him that the battle was over. With the cease-fire his means of direction had gone. Wearily he crashed his way through the forest until at last he came to an open stretch with a small island of trees about two hundred yards ahead. He made his way toward them, eager for their cover in case the Japs were still about.

"Rat-at-at-tat!"

"Got the swine!" exclaimed Smudger Smith, still

squinting along the barrel of the Bren gun with the smoke curling lazily from its end. "Thought we'd cleared the lot of 'em out, didn't you, Bill?"

"Ah," agreed Bill slowly. "Crafty lot of divils. Ah don't trust none of 'em, even them as is dead."

"Think we ought to give 'im a few more to make sure?"

"Help. I'm English."

"Shammin' eh! Well, this'll settle yer," muttered Smudger settling the butt more comfortably into his shoulder, his finger crooked round the trigger.

"'Alf a sec." Bill spoke faster now as he gripped Smudger's arm, "he didn't sound like a Jap. Where you from?" he called out loudly.

There was a moment's silence, then weakly came a reply, "Thirty-four Column. . . . Lance-Corporal Gale."

Smudger looked rather blankly at Bill. "How many goals did Sixty-three Column beat you by last Christmas?" the latter shouted.

Again there was a slight lull.

"They didn't . . . we won . . . two nil."

"He's English all right. Give us a hand to fetch 'im in."

Stormy lay on his side, doubled up as he had been thrown by the bullets which had ripped into his stomach. "Don't move me," he whispered as they made to straighten him out. "Fetch . . . officer . . . quickly."

Chapter 14

BRIGADIER GERARD STEPHEN DANSING, whom they called "The Dancer" for obvious reasons, was in a bad temper, a very bad temper in fact.

His brigade had now been operating behind the enemy

lines for about three months and had enjoyed a considerable measure of success against their lines of communications. In spite of their efforts, and those of the other Chindit brigades, the enemy continued to get some supplies to his front line troops, not enough but more than was to be expected in view of the damage which the Chindits had caused. The problem had rather mystified the staff in India, until a fortnight ago that is, for at that time one of "The Dancer's" columns had had to make a detour through the hills and had come across a new Jap railway track where the maps showed none. The news had been radioed to India with the result that "The Dancer" had been ordered to secure the pass through which the railway ran, and destroy the vital supply line.

It was from then that "The Dancer's" troubles began in earnest. One of the other brigades had torn up the line before it reached the pass, but supplies were still trickling through, and "The Dancer" had been held at the pass. It was not just the Japs but the Japs and Nature combined that he was up against, for across the whole width of the pass almost there stretched a dense tangle of bamboo. For two weeks his battle-weary troops had flung themselves at the enemy defences with only a few yards of jungle to show for it. He knew that unless something happened to restore their morale they would crack.

But the source of his bad temper was one man. He had not known Stormy, who had not even belonged to his brigade, but he had heard his story and felt a great compassion for him. He had sworn to avenge the death of so gallant a man and could hardly wait to put the plan into action.

Snatching up the field telephone he asked irritably, "That you, Chambers? Dansing here. I want you to send Quinton over here at once. What? I don't care what the devil he's doing I want him here, and quickly." He

rattled the receiver back on to its cradle, continuing to stare at it for a moment.

"He may know the whereabouts of this track they talk of," he said, addressing the Brigade Major who sat opposite him, seemingly engrossed in a minute examination of his tattered bush-hat. "Served somewhere round these parts with the Forestry Department before the war you know." The brigade major looked up, nodded and went back to examining the bush-hat.

Getting to his feet the brigadier began pacing up and down, his chin resting on his chest, hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets. "I don't suppose it could be avoided really, could it?"

"Sir?" asked the brigade major, looking a little surprised.

"His getting killed by our own men."

The bush-hat was laid aside. "No sir. He was still wearing a Japanese uniform." He got up to pace alongside his chief. "Apparently he didn't ever know our troops were there, and it was understandable of our chaps to open fire in view of the enemy attack. Just one of those unfortunate happenings in war."

"Unfortunate!" The word cracked out like a whip-lash. "It's more than unfortunate, it's damned tragic after what he had been through. What's more, he brought with him the only feasible plan for seizing the pass that has been suggested either here or by the Staff in India."

The brigade major stepped to one side, a little shamefaced, allowing him to pace alone.

"And that includes myself," "The Dancer" added softly, as an afterthought.

He sat down heavily in his chair and looked at his watch. "It's 8.10 now. Quinton should be here by 8.30. Let's have those chaps who escaped previously in now and see how the loose ends tie up." As the brigade major got up

to go he added, "You know, MacDonald, this Corporal Donovan must be some man, eh."

Captain Donald Quinton, one-time forestry officer and now in command of a column recce platoon, did not know the track along the ridge overlooking the pass, but after surveying a map and talking with Dingy, Roberts and Rawnley, he informed the brigadier that he could find it.

"Good. Good man," said "The Dancer" briskly.

"There's just one thing though, sir."

"Um? What's that?"

"That track appears to be an old forestry boundary trail which the enemy have widened to make use of, and in that case it will most likely run along the whole length of the crest. I've seen evidence of it at our end but it is now overgrown. If the Japs have bothered to make their part passable it's ten to one they've got it well guarded." He put his finger on the map. "If you want to get to this point quickly, sir, then taking the track is not going to be of much use. I could possibly get a small party there unobserved by taking it over the ridge and going in from the other side, but with a large party and animals that would be impossible."

"I see." "The Dancer" pulled at his bottom lip, a sure sign that he was deep in thought, and stared at the map for a time. "Um! You say you could take it from the far side," he murmured at last. "Could a column launch an attack from that side?"

Quinton looked closely at the map again before venturing a reply. "Without animals it should be possible to get a column up here, sir, about quarter of a mile from the estimated position of the enemy bunkers. The slope at that point isn't too severe and it's a teak belt. The trouble will be getting them there in the first place."

"Don't you worry about that. Atherton's West Africans

are on their way to join us and should be about a mile and a half from there now. MacDonald," he called to the brigade major, "Get in touch with Atherton and have him detach his fighting group to this point at once. Quinton will meet him there. How long do you think it will take you, Quinton?"

Looking at his wrist watch the captain replied, "It's about an hour and forty-five minutes' march. Say eleven at the latest, sir."

"Hear that, MacDonald? Quinton will meet him at eleven. All animals to be left with the soft elements who are to make their way here. Mortars, machine-guns and flame-throwers to be manhandled by the fighting column. I know he won't like it," he continued as the brigade major grimaced, "but there's no alternative, and those blacks can do it if anyone can. Tell him to report as soon as he's in position for final instructions, and to establish a wireless post at the base of the hill as he won't be able to take a heavy set with him. When you've got that done call in all column commanders for an immediate conference. Right, Quinton. I'm sending a section of men with you and you can take these two along." He indicated Rawnley and Roberts. "Off you go now, and good luck."

"But, sir," protested Dingy, "can I not go with them?"

"I'm sorry, Corporal, but they've got to move fast and you're not fit enough. As soon as we can spare a light plane you'll be going out."

Captain Quinton and his party reached the rendezvous a little ahead of schedule to find a number of West Africans already there. Going over to Colonel Atherton by the wireless set he learned that the main column had not yet arrived but was expected shortly, and that a second column of West Africans was on its way to join them.

Whilst they were talking Atherton's troops started to

come in, big ebony fellows all of them, their tribal markings plainly visible on their shiny black faces. Some had mortars, bombs or flame-throwers perched incongruously on their heads.

Quinton suggested that he should push on with the section to establish the precise position of the Jap strong-point. On receiving the colonel's acquiescence he and his original party began the ascent to the crest.

There was no path, but it was fairly easy making their way through the teak, and were soon at the top where they found the track as Rawnley and Roberts had testified.

While the captain studied the lay-out the others took up defensive positions among the trees. Rawnley and Roberts stuck close together.

"Yer can't trust yer own side can yer, Dave?" whispered the little Cockney. "Orl that trouble we went to to get out an' wot do they do, brings us blinkin' well back again."

"Aye. The very thought of it gives me the creeps," agreed Dave.

"We wus better orf before. Nar poor ole Stormy's a gonner an' the yellor bellies 'as got the corp. Wot d'yer fink they'll do to 'im?"

"Dunno, but if it hadn't been for the corp they wouldn't have got me back hefe. I'll get some of the devils if they've harmed Donovan though, you see if I don't." Rawnley gritted through clenched teeth.

After his brief survey Quinton called up the column, informing Colonel Atherton of the situation before pressing on along the track.

As his small party started off again a formation of fighter-bombers appeared from the West, flying fast and low. They were to carry out a low-level bombing attack as a prelude to the brigade's all-out effort to break through the Jap defences, at the same time preventing the enemy from withdrawing troops for the defence of their headquarters.

"Forestry trail, recently widened but little used," Quinton murmured inwardly as he read once familiar signs.

Phwing ! A rifle cracked and the leading scout dropped with a slight groan as the remainder of the section went into the trees, dropping some way down the slopes on either side of the track in their efforts to escape the unseen marksman.

Quinton went with them, his thoughts of pre-war days shattered. "Blast !" he swore to himself, "I wasn't expecting them to be so close. I wonder where the corporal is ?" He edged forward to where one of the men was kneeling behind a tree.

The question on his lips was drowned as the first bombs thundered on to the Jap defences, the report echoing and re-echoing as the hills flung back the sound.

Bending down he bellowed in the rifleman's ear, "Quick, follow me, we've got to get that lad in." Without waiting to see whether he was obeyed or not he dashed along the track, doubled up and with his pistol gripped in his right hand. Reaching the wounded man he grabbed his pack-strap as the rifleman pounded up, catching hold of his comrade's ankles.

"Aiee." One of the Japs screeched shrilly as he observed them.

"Leave him to me and engage them," Quinton shouted above the noise of the bombing, but some other hand came to their aid for a mills bomb burst just off the track some few yards ahead. Instinctively they flung themselves flat. The captain felt a thud on his back which he later discovered to be a piece of shrapnel embedded in his pack.

Before they could get to their feet there was a wild cry and, looking up, Quinton saw the corporal and three men charge at the Jap fox-hole. An automatic opened up, driving them to earth again, but from the other side of the

track a Bren gun started firing and the enemy gun switched to cover the new threat.

Seizing his chance, one of the men with the corporal flung a grenade, running forward to throw another directly into the fox-hole almost as soon as the first one had exploded.

Expecting him to drop flat, Quinton watched amazed as he continued to stand there slowly twisting round, then the grenade exploded and his legs buckled as he fell dead.

The brigade's mortars had now joined the bombardment. Quinton could distinguish the heavy crumps of the big 4.2's and the sharper crash of the smaller weapons. "Stay with your friend here until the column comes up," he called above the combined din. Leaving the shelter of the trees, he doubled forward in a series of short dashes to where the corporal's party were busy engaging another enemy position. He covered the last few feet on his belly for death was whistling uncomfortably close. Worming his way beside the corporal he saw the Jap bunker, its log and earth roof protruding from the trees to one side of the track, barely two feet above ground level, looking almost impregnable against small arms fire.

"It's going to be tough without the mortars, sir," said the corporal, a slim built chap who looked prematurely old.

"We will wait until they arrive," Quinton replied. "Just make sure no one leaves and tell everyone to get into cover."

Events moved quickly when the column arrived, the mortars were soon ranged on the target. The bunker stood up to the bombardment extremely well, however, and several attacks were broken up by the enemy machine-gun fire.

At last a particularly heavy mortar barrage was laid down, a flame-throwing team creeping forward under its protection. With a roar a searing flame of liquid fire shot forward, scorching the trees and grass in its path, the jet

centred on the bunker and with a fierce crackle the timber roof blazed.

A cry rose from a dozen throats as a Jap broke cover beyond the now burning bunker, his clothing on fire. He made no attempt to run. Instead he stood facing the British blasting away at them with a light automatic until he was riddled with bullets.

Quietly the column filed past the scene of carnage ; the still fiercely burning bunker ; the dead Jap soldier crumpled lifelessly in the dust, his face twisted with pain and hatred. An acrid smell of roasting flesh arose from the bunker with its grisly contents. The Africans eyed it with disgust as they passed, but several admiring glances were cast grudgingly toward the Jap on the track.

The enemy's stubborn resistance had held them up for longer than they had expected, but now they were able to make good progress for the track was deserted. Although rather undulating and, in places, very narrow, it was in quite good condition.

For the most part they were shielded from below by the trees, but occasionally they caught a glimpse of the pass itself through gaps in the trees. It was through such a gap that Roberts caught sight of the Jap headquarters some short distance ahead.

"We can't be very far off the branch track, sir," he reported, just as one of the forward scouts came back to say there was a track leading down into the pass.

As the Africans streamed down the path they saw tumultuous activity in the enemy camp as men ran hither and thither, some throwing up hasty barricades, and dragging guns into position, others piling into cars, lorries, in fact any transport which could take them away from the danger spot quickly.

The column's mortars, ranging on the camp from the hill track, were soon in action, causing further panic among

the enemy who replied wildly with anti-aircraft guns which had been pressed into service.

Suicide squads rushed up to meet the Africans and a fierce hand-to-hand battle developed on the track. Both sides lost heavily in the internecine fighting but meanwhile the other Africans fanned out behind the hold-up and into the trees where they continued to advance slowly through the fairly thick bush.

A wild charge by the black tribesmen finally overran the fanatic defenders, who fired until they were killed. The British attack surged forward until it came to the barricades and a withering cross-fire of machine-guns, mortars and rifles.

One of the flame-throwers was moving down the track to join the battle when a mortar bomb landed close by and with a terrific "whoosh!" the lifebuoy container exploded, sending a stream of fire soaring into the air, killing the whole team agonisingly but quickly.

The accident cheered the Nipponese, and one sword-brandishing officer leapt over the barricade, rushing at the Africans, killing one of the askaris before a bullet put paid to his adventures.

Desultory firing broke out on the flank as the first line of troops emerged from the trees. This was the enemy's weak spot and as more Africans entered the fray the Japs rushed in their few reserves, cooks, signallers, batmen, clerks, all were given a rifle to fight off the attackers. And fight they did! Africans and Japs fired until their guns were hot and their ammunition expended, then they flew at each other with bayonets and knives.

Gradually the Japs were pushed back until they were on the open parade ground where the Africans' fire played havoc with them, but using their comrades' bodies as shields, the others fought on.

P.I.A.T. guns were pounding the barricades on the

track to pieces at point blank range, but it was not until another flame-thrower was brought into use that the defences broke.

First one badly burned Jap turned to run, only to be cut to death by a frenzied officer, then another and another until the trickle had turned into a rout, the cheering Africans pouring through the gap taking a dreadful toll of the stricken enemy.

Small groups still fought doggedly on, but the line was down, the attackers sweeping on toward the camp buildings before the Japs could put up a stand there.

Roberts and Rawnley raced across the square, intent on rescuing Donovan, and as they did so, a blinding explosion rent the air as an ammunition dump blew up. They both dropped flat as pieces of shrapnel flew about. As they got to their feet again Roberts screamed, "Dave! Look there!" He stopped dead in his tracks, aghast at the sight.

Rawnley followed his pointing finger, gasping with horror, for a mule, crazed by the noise, had burst from behind the buildings running madly round the clearing dragging a man's body after it. They both knew it was Donovan.

Dropping his rifle, Rawnley sprinted toward the animal, flinging himself at its head, but the beast swerved violently, sending him crashing to the ground.

When he saw Rawnley fall, Roberts dropped on to one knee, pumping bullet after bullet at the mule until it crumpled and fell, slithering along in the dust by its own momentum.

Rawnley had now got to his feet. Seeing the mule fall, he ran over and bent down by the mangled figure of Donovan, his hands skewered by a bayonet, the lower part of his face and most of his body a red, bloody, pulpy mass from the battering he had received.

Slashing the rope he clasped the corporal to him.

"Bob! What have the fiends done to you?" he cried in anguish as Donovan wearily opened his eyes, already glazed with approaching death.

"Stormy?" the faltering whisper was barely audible.

"Stormy made it O.K.," replied Rawnley, the sob catching in his throat. "He couldn't come himself but sent you a message. 'The ghost from Africa has been laid.'"

Donovan nodded slightly as Roberts came up at a run. He stood for a moment looking down at the mangled body of his friend and the tears started running freely down his cheeks. With an effort he tried to hide his emotion.

"Cut yerself shavin', Corp?" he asked, the words streaming from his mouth as he fought to keep control of his voice. "Yer out of practice, that's the trouble. It's a good job yer didn't come wiv us," he went on. "They didn't 'ave no bully stew ar'er all. 'Rice only' sez that lop-eared cook. 'Rice! Wot do yer fink I am, a blinkin' coolie?' I arks 'im. 'Bully's only fer them in the line,' he sez wiv a plum in 'is mouf. 'Well, give us the rice then, cock,' I tells 'im, 'cos 'Lain't goin' there, it's bad fer me 'elf.'"

The dying eyes brightened for a moment, a crack split open the gory mess of his face, and the corporal smiled.

His last patrol was completed.

GLOSSARY

- Banzai* : Jap "cheer" word and "charge" cry.
Buta no ko and *Inpu no ko* : Son of a pig.
Byoki : Ill, sickness.
Kare wo utte : Beat him.
Kempeitai : Japanese military police.
Koko-e-koi : Come here.
Kritz : Attention.
Tenno Heika : His Imperial Majesty the Emperor.
Ya-yoroshii : Yes—good.
Yasmae : Jap drill command meaning "at ease."
Yoroshii : Good.
Ingerris : English (pidgin).
Sojer : Soldier (pidgin).
Speak-ki : Speak.
Ka ? : Question.
Oro : All.
Oroways : Always.

